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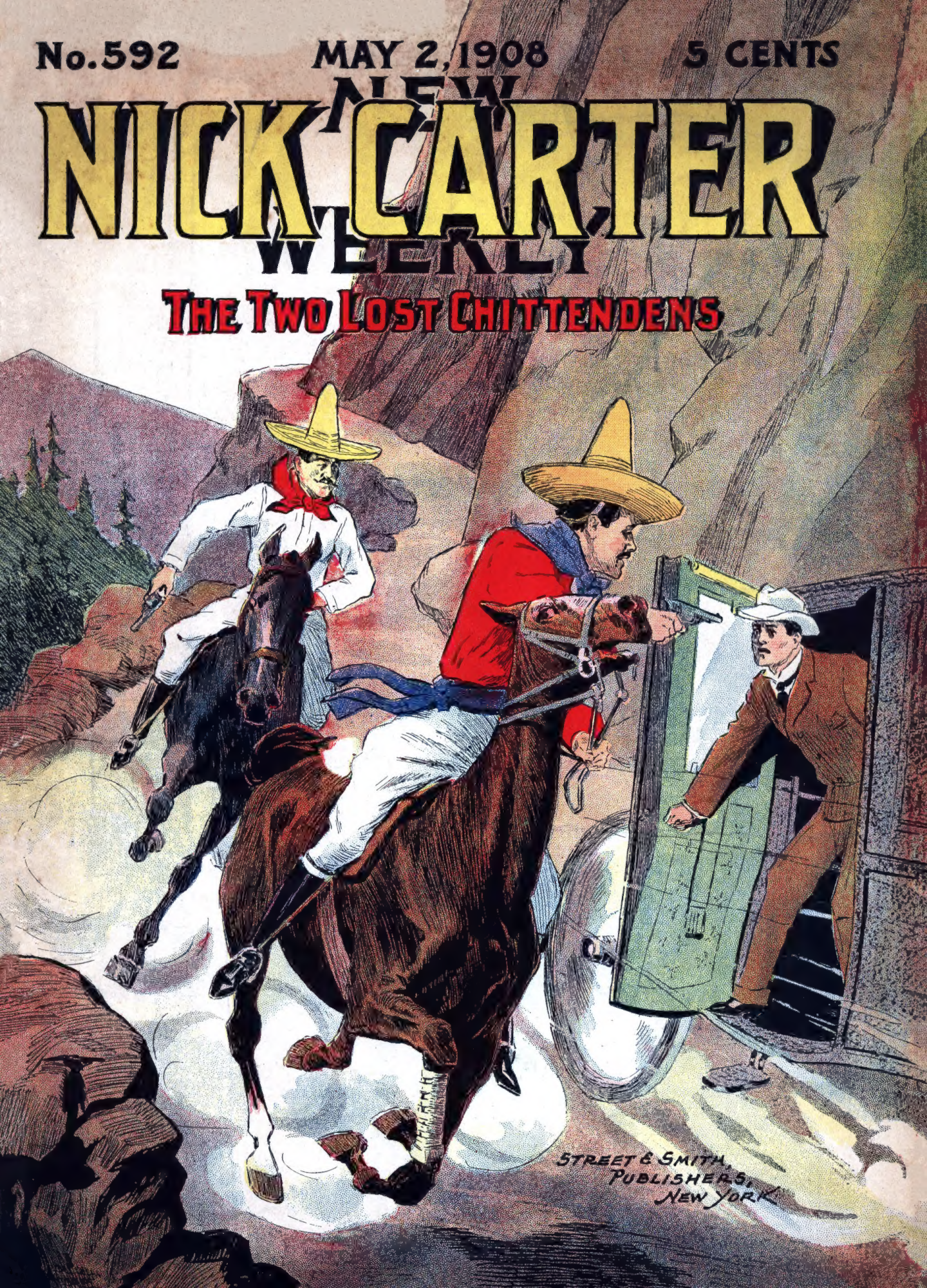
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE TWO LOST CHITTENDENS



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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The Two Lost Chittendens;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S CLUE BY CABLE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF TWO.

Nick Carter took from the salver the card brought to him by Joseph and read from it, aloud, the name "Mr. Joseph Chamberlain Chittenden." Then he knitted his brows for a moment in the effort to remember where he had seen or heard the name before, after which he turned the card over and read a line that was written in pencil on the back of it.

"Introduced to you some years ago in the city of Mexico, by Mr. Jean Bannister," it said, and it brought to light the circumstances of his former meeting with the man.

"Show the gentleman into the library, Joseph," he said, "and say that I will be down in a few moments."

When he entered the library five minutes later, a tall, fine-looking Englishman, evidently just past middle age, rose to greet him.

"I hope you remember me, Mr. Carter," he said.

"I do now, perfectly, although I will confess that until I read what was on the back of your card I was puzzled to recall the name while it seemed familiar to me. It was in the year eighteen and ninety-four, was it not, that we met?"

"Yes. In the City of Mexico. I was on a pleasure tour with my family if you will remember, and had looked up my old friend, John Bannister, whom I had known in London, before he went out to that country. You were with him when I called, and we were introduced. After that I think we met quite frequently during the two weeks that I was there."

"Oh, yes. I remember you perfectly now, Mr. Chittenden."

"I wonder if you also remember the members of my family? I think you met Mrs. Chittenden and the children, Mr. Carter."

"Indeed I did. I do remember them very well indeed. May I inquire concerning them?"

"I lost my wife nearly ten years ago, Mr. Carter. It is in behalf of those two children that I have called upon you now."

"I hope they are in no trouble, sir."

"They have disappeared, Mr. Carter. It would seem as if they had gone to the edge of the world and jumped off, so thoroughly have they passed out of the sight and the knowledge of all who knew them."

"Let me think a moment," said the detective. "If I recall the circumstances correctly, they were respectively eight and five years old at the time I knew them; no?"

"Precisely, Mr. Carter. Harry is now twenty-two, and Rose will be nineteen next month—if she is living."

"Surely you do not consider the matter so serious as all that, sir?" exclaimed the detective.

"The fact is, Mr. Carter, I do not know what to think. The entire matter is so shrouded in mystery, and I was all the time so far from the scene of it all, that I am totally in the dark. It was to secure your services and to prevail upon you to go to Mexico with me in the search for my children, that I came here to-day."

"Am I to understand that they were in the City of Mexico when they disappeared?"

"Yes, sir."

"And together?"

"Yes; they were with, or rather a part of a regular party of tourists—twenty, I believe there were, all told. They had some slight recollection of their visit to Mexico as children, and when this opportunity offered to make the trip, they were both eager to do so. I saw no objection, as the party was well made up and contained only such persons as I would wish them to associate with. So they went."

"And how long ago was that?"

"They left London exactly three months ago."

"And the disappearances occurred—when?"

"As nearly as I can fix the time, four weeks ago."

"How soon after the disappearances were you informed of the incident?"

"Approximately, a week."

"So it is now three weeks since you learned of the disappearances?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have doubtless taken some measures to search for them during those three weeks?"

"I certainly have."

"Will you tell me what you have done?"

"I cabled at once to the chief of police of the City of Mexico, offering a substantial reward for information concerning them. A week later I increased the reward to one thousand pounds—five thousand dollars in your money, I believe."

"Yes."

"I also cabled the Pinkerton detective agency in Chicago to the same effect, and I wrote a personal letter to General Pacheco of the Mexican army, asking him as a friend to spur on the efforts in my behalf; and in addition to all that, I used what influence I had to have our Ambassador at Mexico take the matter up, which I am sure he did."

"And there have been no results from all those efforts?"

"Not one."

"So you have decided to take the matter up personally, eh?"

"What else could I do? What else was there for me to do? I left England on the *Mauretania* of the Cunard line, and I have come directly to you, Mr. Carter. In the midst of my anguish about the disappearance of my children, I recalled the meeting with you in Mexico; I remembered what my friend said about you at the time; I recalled, too, something about the business that took you there then, and instantly it occurred to me that you were the very man to help me through this dark chapter of my life, if only I could find you. Will you go to Mexico with me, Mr. Carter? Money is no object to me, as you possibly know. Will you go?"

"Yes; I think I may say that I will—if you will wait until to-morrow evening to start. There are some matters which will require my attention before I start."

"I will wait. Another twenty-four hours can make little difference now."

"What is known about the disappearances, Mr. Chittenden?"

"So far as I have been able to determine—nothing."

"What has been told you about them?"

"Merely that my son and daughter left the hotel where they were stopping for a stroll together one evening, and have not been seen or heard of since that moment."

"What hotel was it?"

"The Iturbide."

"Just how do you make use of the word 'evening', if you please? Here in this country, the word has several meanings. In Virginia evening means any time at all after noon—midday. In New York we do not say evening until darkness has fallen."

"I am informed that they went out from the hotel at about half-past five o'clock."

"Had they mentioned to any person where they were going?"

"Yes. To the Zocolo and the cathedral first, after which they said they intended to take a walk as far as the Cavallito, at the entrance of the Passeo. They were to return to the hotel in time to accompany several of the party to the National Theater, at the head of the calle Cinco de Mayo where the opera of Don Giovanni was given that night."

"They did not return?"

"No. Nothing has been seen of them since they passed out of the hotel to San Francisco Street and turned to the right toward the Zocolo. From that moment they passed out of sight entirely."

"Were they alone together—I mean, did no other member or members of the party accompany them?"

"No; they were alone."

"How long a time had they been in Mexico at the time this happened?"

"In Mexico, rather more than a month. In the City of Mexico, about ten days, as nearly as my information tells me."

"Then the party had already been traveling in other parts of the republic?"

"Yes. The party was really made up expressly for a trip through Mexico. It came from London directly to New York, but remained here only a short time. They went from here to Mexico by rail."

"Do you know about the itinerary? Do you know at what places they stopped before arriving at the City of Mexico?"

"In effect, I do. They visited Chihuahua, San Luis Potosi, Salamance, Durango, Guadalajara, Morelia, Patzcuerro—my information on this point is rather indefinite. There was also Zacatecas, I believe."

"Very likely. You cabled, directing the search for them and offering the reward, as soon as you were aware of what had happened, did you?"

"Yes."

"What reports have you received from the several parties to whom you cabled?"

"Merely that no information concerning them was obtainable."

"Had either of your children visited Mexico since the time you met me there?"

"No, sir."

"Mr. Bannister, your old friend, is, I have been informed, dead."

"That is true."

"Had your son and daughter any acquaintances or friends in Mexico upon whom they intended to call, or to whom they intended to make themselves known?"

"Not one that I am aware of."

"Had there been such a person, or persons, you would have known about it?"

"Most certainly."

"As brother and sister, your children were fond of each other?"

"Devoted to each other."

"May I ask if the affections of either of them were engaged?"

"I am not aware that either of them had a thought of marriage, more than to regard it as a condition into which they must some time enter."

"Will you attempt to give me some idea of the personality of each of them, please?"

"I will try. And I do not think it will be difficult. Both were always entirely frank with me, and since the death of their mother, I have filled both places to them, as far as I was able to do so."

"Tell me about your son, first, if you please. Describe his appearance to me. Tell me about his habits, his tastes, his pleasures, his enjoyments, his hobbies, if he had any, or even one. Tell me, moreover, about his friends—I mean his intimates, at home."

Mr. Chittenden smiled; then he said:

"I hope, Mr. Carter, that you will not think I overdo it when I do that. I shall try not to speak more highly of them than they deserve."

"I am quite sure of that, Mr. Chittenden."

CHAPTER II.

A THREAT TWENTY YEARS OLD.

"You have noticed, doubtless, that I am a large man, Mr. Carter," began Mr. Chittenden. "I am a trifle more than six feet in height and my natural weight is two hundred pounds. In my youth I was counted an athlete."

"I have no doubt of it. I fancy you could give rather a good account of yourself now, if occasion called for it, sir."

"I could, indeed. I called attention to my own physique for the reason that my son Harry—Hal, we have always called him at home—is built about on the same plan. If there is a difference between him and what I used to be, it is in his favor. He is even bigger and stronger than I was at his age. You asked if he had a hobby or a fad. He has only one—athletics."

"I take it, then, that he is a powerful young man."

"He is a wonder in that respect, Mr. Carter."

"And therefore thoroughly capable of taking care of himself in the art of self-defense, I mean?"

"Yes, sir. And not only with his fists, but with almost any kind of weapon as well."

"Indeed?"

"He included fencing in his athletic pursuits, and has taken lessons of the best masters in Europe. With a wrist like steel and eyes like a hawk, he became exceedingly expert. He is called one of the best men with the rapier and the broadsword as well as with the saber, in Europe."

"That is interesting."

"He is also a wonderful pistol-shot."

"His height is about the same as yours?"

"Yes. I think exactly the same. He is not so heavy."

"Of course not. What is his coloring?"

"Like mine—before I was gray. His hair is light in color; his eyes are blue and large and round. He has a way of looking directly at you when he speaks that is the acme of utter frankness and honesty."

"Shaved clean?"

"Yes; always. He is light on his feet, and graceful. I hope, Mr. Carter, that you will pardon a father's natural pride in a handsome son."

"Assuredly. Now, about his habits. Had he any, or even one, of which you did not approve? I trust you will be entirely frank with me."

"If he had such a one, I was not aware of it."

"His taste ran to athletics, you say. To what else?"

"Sports in the field. He is fond of horses and dogs

and guns and yachting. He liked anything that took him out of doors."

"What about his selection of friends?"

"His friends were among those who enjoyed the same pleasures that he does. I can say no more than that."

"Was he popular among them?"

"Exceedingly so."

"Were there any of his intimate friends in this particular party?"

"One. The young earl of Darnley—Jack Douglass, by name."

"Where is he now?"

"In the City of Mexico, awaiting my arrival."

"He has remained there since the disappearances?"

"Yes."

"And kept up the search?"

"Yes. He remained solely for that purpose."

"What sort of a chap is he?"

"One whom I greatly admire. One in whom I have hoped to see a future son-in-law."

"Ah! I see. Has his hopes coincided with yours, sir?"

"I believe they have. I know that he is in love with my daughter."

"But she has not returned it, eh?"

"I don't really think it ever occurred to her. She has regarded Jack as almost another brother. I am quite sure that he has never asked her to marry him, but I am also confident that he has always believed she would do so some day."

"Is your daughter attractive?"

"She has the name of being among the most beautiful young women in England."

"Is she light, like her brother?"

"Yes. In fact, they are as nearly alike as persons of the opposite sexes could be. Rose has a wealth of sunny hair that has just a suggestion of gold in it; if the light falls upon it just right. Her complexion is perfect; her eyes are as blue as the sea at Naples; she is rather taller than the average young woman, but as graceful as a fawn; she is bright almost to brilliancy, full of laughter and jokes, and fond of a good time—and in her way—a young woman's way, of course—almost as much of an athlete as her brother."

"Indeed."

"It has been one of Hal's fads to teach his sister everything he knew himself. He has given her fencing-lessons until she can handle the foils and other weapons of the kind almost as expertly as he can. He has taught her to shoot, to ride, to sail—in short, to do all the things he is fond of doing. That is one explanation of their devotion to each other."

"I should argue from all that, that she is also of a fearless disposition, sir."

"Mr. Carter, if Rose has a fault, it exists in that very fact. She is afraid of nothing. She is as fearless as a man; as self-reliant—and I might say as competent to take care of herself. I have heard Hal say that she boxes so well that if she had the physical strength of a man, she would worst him."

"She has other accomplishments?"

"She sings beautifully, if that is what you mean. She is an indifferent performer on the piano. They both speak several languages—French, Italian, Spanish, and a smattering of German. There, I think I have given you a fair idea of what my children have become since you saw them, fourteen years ago, or nearly that."

"It is all very interesting. Where are you stopping, Mr. Chittenden?"

"I have sent my luggage to the Holland. I came directly here from the steamer—that is, as soon as I was able to obtain the address. I telephoned to police headquarters for that."

"Now, Mr. Chittenden, on general principles, there are a few other questions I should ask, although I am already satisfied as to what the replies will be."

"You may ask anything that occurs to you, Mr. Carter."

"To begin, then, is there anywhere in the world any man who has been a suitor for your daughter's hand, who has been unsuccessful, and who might, because of that fact, have cherished some feeling of resentment toward her?"

"I am not aware of such a person."

"Is there anywhere, do you suppose, a woman whom your son may have wronged, more or less seriously?"

"I cannot believe there is, sir. I have never had any information of the existence of such a person."

"You are not aware that either of your children has, or has had an enemy?"

"No."

"How about yourself?"

"Myself?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I suppose I have enemies in plenty, scattered over the world. A man who has lived to my age, and who has always been more or less closely allied to governmental affairs—that is to politics—must make enemies."

"Political enemies as a rule do not seek vengeance for their wrongs upon the children of those whom they dislike. Have you never made an enemy of another sort?"

"Of another sort? I do not understand."

"Have you never made an enemy of a *woman?*"

"Eh? By Jove! No. I don't think so. Certainly not since I was a youth. When I was twenty there was something of the sort—but we need not go into that."

"Not if you decline to do so; but if you do not, I would like to hear about it."

"My dear sir, that was almost forty years ago; before my children were born—before I was married, in fact.

And it happened in Paris. For the life of me I cannot see what possible bearing an incident that I had totally forgotten, and that happened so long ago, can have upon this case."

"Probably none at all. You say it happened in Paris?"

"Yes."

"Were you greatly at fault in the matter?"

"Not really, although it must have appeared that I was."

"How was that?"

"Oh, well, if you must hear about it, I can tell you the story in a few words."

"Yes?"

"I was one of those young chaps who fell madly in love with every pretty face I saw—and fell out of it just as easily, as quickly and as soon as another one showed in my horizon. I am glad to say that Hal did not take after me in that respect."

"That is, if he did, you are not aware of it. Please go on."

"I was in Paris. I made the acquaintance of this particular young lady at a reception given by our ambassador, at the embassy. Our acquaintance ripened. I fell madly in love with her, of course, for she was very beautiful. I sought her. She was apparently as much taken with me as I was with her. I declared my love for her, and she returned my affection, or said she did—and all this, you must understand, was done in secret. We became engaged, also in secret, but then I wrote home to my father, telling him of what I had done, and asking his consent to my marriage with her. For reply, he came to Paris after me, and carted me off to England, swearing that if I refused to accompany him, he would cast me off utterly. He was a stern old chap, and I knew he would be as good as his word; so I went."

"Without a word to the young woman?"

"Yes. I had no chance to send her word, and no way of doing so, anyhow."

"Did you never hear from her?"

"No. I saw her once, several years—in fact, a number of years afterward—when we were both married."

"And spoke with her?"

"Why, we exchanged a word or two. I recall one expression she used at that time which puzzled me greatly for a long time, but which had now faded from my mind until you recalled it."

"What was it?"

"I said to her, foolishly, I suppose, 'Have you forgotten our last meeting?' And she replied, 'No, I have not forgotten, and some day perhaps you will have cause to remember it.'"

"Doesn't that sound to you rather like a threat, Mr. Chittenden?"

"It did at the time; but I don't think it was so intended."

"Who was the young woman?"

"She was the niece of the Ambassador from Spain, when I first met her."

"What was her name?"

"Mercedes de Echeverria."

"Her married name, I mean, when you met her the last time?"

"Bless you, I haven't the remotest idea. I have entirely forgotten. I do not think I comprehended it at the time."

CHAPTER III.

GETTING THE FACTS OF THE CASE.

During the days that were required to transport the detective and Mr. Chittenden to the City of Mexico, they discussed the cause of their visit many times, but there was literally no further information to be obtained from the father of the young man and woman who were lost than has appeared here already.

It is true, however, that Nick Carter obtained, during that journey, a very clear insight into the characters of the two young persons who had so mysteriously disappeared, and to their credit, be it said, that the more he heard about them, the more confidential the father became concerning them, the more highly did the detective hold them in his estimation.

As far as he was able to determine, they were simply a young man and woman, brother and sister, who were models of their class, which was the healthy, sport-loving, out-door-air Englishman and Englishwoman.

It was a remarkable thing, he thought, that two such persons as they were, each so capable and self-reliant, should disappear as they had done, in the streets of a city like Mexico, at an hour when darkness had not yet fallen, and from a public thoroughfare that is in every way as well guarded and cared for as is Broadway in the City of New York; or that part of Fifth Avenue which extends from Twenty-third to Thirty-fourth Street.

That is, it was most remarkable, unless they had gone away of their own accord, and such a condition as that he regarded as entirely out of the question.

While the train was entering the city, on the morning of the travelers' arrival there, the detective said to his companion:

"Mr. Chittenden, I would prefer that you do not let it be known that I am a detective. I am not very well known here, although I have visited the city several times. It is true that there are those who know me quite well, and to those few I shall apply at once for such assistance as we may need while here. You understand?"

"Perfectly."

They found the young earl of Darnley at the Iturbide,

and, inasmuch as he preferred to be known only as Mr. John Douglass, we will refer to him in that manner.

A telegram had apprised him of their coming, and he was awaiting their arrival at the hotel. As having been a member of the party from which the two missing ones had disappeared, Nick hoped to obtain some information from him which would suggest a solution of the mystery. In this idea, as it happened, he was not mistaken.

Douglass had a room on the third floor, which is the top one of the hotel, fronting on the back *patio*, and the detective and Chittenden succeeded in securing others on either side of it, so they were all together in their quarters; and to these rooms they repaired as soon as possible after their arrival, to discuss the matter which absorbed their attention.

"Mr. Douglass," said Nick, when they were seated together in the latter's room, "do you suppose that you can undergo a rather rigid examination, and give direct answers to such questions as I shall ask?"

"Yes, sir; I do. I shall be most happy to reply to anything you will ask, and I only hope that concealed somewhere about me I have information that will be of assistance to you."

"I haven't a doubt in the world that you have such information, although you are probably totally unaware of it. We frequently know things which we have no idea that we know."

"That sounds rather like a bull, doesn't it? Or a Hibernianism, Mr. Carter?"

"Perhaps; but I have often found that it is quite true, and among those who are quite as intelligent as ourselves. Now, as I understand it, you were with the party from the time it started from London?"

"I was."

"Mr. Chittenden has taken me so far into his confidence as to tell me that you cherished some hopes of becoming his son-in-law. Is that true, Mr. Douglass?"

"It is the truest thing you ever said. Yes, sir."

"Because of that fact, you would naturally, on such a trip, feel an absorbing interest in anything and in all things that interested Rose Chittenden; eh?"

"Certainly."

"And there would be very little concerning her, or concerning what she did, or did not do, while on that trip, that you were not more or less familiar with. That is so, isn't it?"

"Quite so."

"May I ask rather a blunt question? I want you to be entirely frank with me."

"Yes."

"Since you left London, did you at any time mention your love to Miss Chittenden?"

"I did; on one occasion."

"Will you tell me when that was?"

"It was the morning of the day of her disappearance."

"That same day, eh? Where were you at the time you referred to the subject with her?"

"We were at the Shrine of Guadalupe. We were the only two who had not visited the place, and so we went there together that morning. We had walked through the little church, and all about the quaint old cemetery, and were half-way down the steps on our return when we stopped to rest. It was then that I spoke to her about my love for her, and asked her to be my wife."

"Will you tell me her answer?"

"She listened to me very quietly and replied very kindly. She replied to me rather strangely, I thought."

"What did she say?"

"She replied: 'I have known about this all along, Jack, of course. I could not help knowing; but I want you to do me a favor. I want you not to refer to the subject again for a whole year, and then you may ask the same question if you like.'"

"Of course you agreed to that?"

"Certainly."

"Her manner led you to suppose that Rose was willing to become your wife, but that she was not yet ready for the question?"

"Precisely."

"Have you ever at any time had reason to suppose that there was a rival in the field?"

"A rival? The world is full of them. But if you mean a rival upon whom she looked with the sort of favor that would make me jealous, I answer with an emphatic no."

"You don't think that she has ever preferred anybody above you?"

"No; I do not. We have been more like brother and sister than anything else all our lives. I cannot remember when I did not think her the most lovable creature in all the world, and I honestly believe that she has always loved me just the same."

"Now, let us refer to Hal for a moment."

"Yes."

"You and he were always good friends?"

"Always."

"Has there ever been a cloud on that friendship?"

"Nothing that you could call a cloud. We have fought like young mastiffs, as boys; we have gone through periods of natural rivalry in our sports; we have had quarrels, but the sun of our friendship always shone the brighter after them."

"At the time of his disappearance there was nothing like a quarrel in your lives, was there?"

"Nothing at all."

"When you and Rose went together to the Shrine of Guadalupe, where was Hal?"

"He went off alone to inspect the Mineria. He told me after our return he had been there and that it was worth seeing, I remember."

"Now let us get down to the moment when Hal and Rose went out together, on that walk from which they did not return."

"Yes, sir."

"Were you present when they started out?"

"No; I was playing billiards in the café."

"With one of your party?"

"No; with a Mexican gentleman whose acquaintance I had made."

"Was he also known to the others of your party?"

"Yes."

"His name."

"Antonio Llorente."

"Then you did not see Hal and his sister go out together?"

"Yes. I saw them as they were going through the *patio* toward the street, and waved my hand at them. I saw them pass through the doorway to the street and turn toward the Zoloco."

"That is the last you saw of them?"

"Yes."

"How long after that did you continue to play billiards?"

"The game was finished within a few minutes, and we did not play another."

"What became of Antonio Llorente?"

"I don't know. I went up to my room to dress. I did not see him again."

"What time should you say it was when Hal and his sister passed out upon the street?"

"To the best of my recollection, about a quarter past five."

"Bright daylight?"

"Yes; the sun was shining. I remember that."

"What time did you return from your room after dressing?"

"I think it was half-past seven, or near that; possibly a little later. I had been writing some letters."

"Was your entire party stopping at the Iturbide?"

"Oh, no, indeed. We were scattered. Some were at the San Carlos, some at the Gillow, some at the Jardin, and other places."

"How many of your party were here?"

"Six, I think. Let me see. There were Hal and Rose, Sir John and Lady Drake, Brag Wheelock, and myself."

"And who is Brag Wheelock?"

"He is really Mr. Charles Wheelock. We used to call him Brag at college, he was such a boaster. But he has gotten all over that. He is one of the best fellows that ever lived, and that reminds me that I received a letter from him the other day from New York in which he stated his intention of returning here. He is likely to happen in at any time."

"You had an engagement for the opera that night. Who was going?"

"There were a dozen of us going. Hal and Rose and I were the only ones from this hotel, however."

"So when you descended the stairs after dressing you naturally expected to find them somewhere about, did you not?"

"Certainly. Before I went down-stairs I stopped at Hal's room and tapped on the door. His *mozo* was there and told me that Hal had not returned. I thought it strange, for I knew he had to dress."

"What did you do then?"

"I went down-stairs and waited around the *patio* for a considerable time. Then I went to Rose's room, but only to find that she had not returned."

"And then——"

"When the time came around to go to the opera, I left a note for them, and went ahead, for I had an idea that they had discovered something more interesting, and would blow in later."

CHAPTER IV.

THE STORY OF THE DISAPPEARANCE.

"You were not uneasy about them at the time?" asked the detective a moment later.

"Not at all. Hal and Rose were always sufficient unto themselves. She would rather be with him than any one else, at any time, and he preferred her to any girl he knew."

"I am going to touch upon that branch of the subject later. You suppose, if you had any thought about it at all, that they had gone off together somewhere else, to see something or hear something that they had heard about while they were out, and which they believed they would prefer to the opera. Is that the idea?"

"It is the idea exactly. In fact, Hal had already voted the opera a bore. He said that he could hear operas at home, at any time, and he didn't see the use in wasting Mexican time in going to one. So I thought nothing at all about it, really."

"Now, when you supposed that they had gone elsewhere, *what was your impression at that time* as to where they had gone?"

"Eh? Repeat that question, will you?"

"I will explain what I mean before I repeat it. If you and I should start out of this hotel right now, and should part at the door, agreeing to meet in an hour at the Cavallito, if I broke the engagement the first question you would ask yourself, would be why? That would include the question: Where had I gone instead? And you would immediately leap at some answer which would be based upon something I had said at some time before the engagement was made. Now I return to the question. When you started out for the opera house without

them, you asked yourself the question: Where had they gone in preference to attending the opera, did you not?"

"Yes."

"What was your answer to that question *at that time?*"

"Mr. Carter, you pin me down rather closely. I don't like to answer that question."

"Why not?"

"Because there was really no reason why I should have given it the answer I did."

"Nevertheless, answer it. What is the answer?"

"Tacabaya."

"Are you by any chance referring to the gambling-house at Tacabaya?"

Douglass flushed hotly, and cast a deprecating look toward Mr. Chittenden who was seated silently in one corner of the room. Then he replied:

"Yes. Jenks'."

"You must have had a reason for jumping at that conclusion. I would like to know, if you will tell me, the exact state of your mind when you made yourself that response."

"It was amusement, I think. I thought how I would guy them both with it in the morning, if my suspicion proved to be correct."

"You had a reason for that suspicion, and what you supposed at the time, at least, was a good one. Whether it really was or not, you supposed it to be, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What was that reason?"

"I suppose you know that women—ladies—are admitted to the tables in one part of that establishment, do you not, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes."

"The grounds around the place are very beautiful, and in fact the whole establishment is of a high order, if such a place can be spoken of in that way at all."

"I know."

"Hal and I had visited it twice together, late in the evening, and Rose had gotten the information out of us that we had been there. She forced us to describe it to her in detail, and then expressed a wish to see it for herself. Once upon a time she asked her father to take her to Monte Carlo, and he refused, although they were very near there at the time. She reminded Hal of that fact, and said that she wanted to see the inside of such a place. We had both put her off, but she kept recurring to the subject, and only the preceding evening Hal had said to me that he thought we had better take her there and let her see the place; that there could be no harm if we were both with her. That conversation came back to me as I started for the opera, and I decided in my own mind that it was where they had gone, or perhaps were going, later in the evening, and that they were purposely keeping out of the way of the opera crowd. That is the whole story, Mr. Carter."

"Now, Mr. Douglass, I will pursue this subject a little further, if you please."

"Very well, sir. Now that the ice is broken, I don't mind. I only hope that Mr. Chittenden will excuse me for having entertained such an idea."

"My dear Jack," said Chittenden, "leave nothing unsaid that can aid us in the least. We are here to find Hal and Rose."

"When you returned from the opera, and discovered that they had not returned to the hotel even then," pursued the detective, "what was your idea about it at that time?"

"I was only the more certain that my first suspicion was correct."

"I supposed as much. Did you go to Tacabaya?"

"I did, at once. I hurried to a car and was there within half an hour of the time I returned from the opera."

"Did you make a search for them through the buildings and grounds?"

"I did; a thorough one."

"Did you make inquiries?"

"Guarded ones."

"Tell me how you made your inquiries."

"I spoke to several of the attendants and said that I was looking for friends whom I expected to find there, a gentleman and a lady, I told them; and then I gave a description of Hal."

"And also of Rose?"

"I merely stated that they were brother and sister and greatly resembled each other, and that the lady was tall and blonde, like her brother."

"I can tell you now," said Nick, "that you received no satisfaction from your questions, or rather from the replies to them, for if Hal and Rose had been in the adjoining room at the time, and each attendant you questioned had known the fact positively, you would have been told that they had not been seen there. Can't you understand why that is so?"

"I can now; yes. I did not think of it at the time. I have not thought of it since."

"Satisfied with the answers, I suppose you came away; eh?"

"No; I lingered for an hour or more."

"Expecting that they might enter?"

"No. It was too late for that. I remained for the reason that I had nothing better to do, and I felt sort of left. You know what I mean."

"Yes."

"I thought that Hal or Rose might at least have told me what was up, and given me a chance to participate."

"Were there many at the gambling-house while you were there?"

"About the usual crowd, I should say."

"Were there ladies among them?"

"Possibly half a dozen. Ladies are not admitted there without an escort, you know."

"I know. Did you make any further inquiries before you left the place?"

"Only one. I spoke to the policeman outside, and described Hal and Rose to him and asked him if he had seen them. He had not. At least, he would have had no reason to deceive me if he had seen them."

"No. That is true. But if I remember correctly, he stands at the intersection of the street a hundred feet away from the gateway, and if Hal and Rose drove there in a carriage, as was doubtless the case if they did go there, he would not have seen them at all."

"That is true."

"You returned to the hotel then?"

"Yes; directly."

"What did you do then?"

"I went first to Hal's room, and then to Rose's, to ascertain if they had returned. I discovered that they had not come back, and I began to feel some uneasiness about them, although I don't know that that is the right word either. I was just puzzled."

"You had every confidence in Hal's ability to take care of his sister?"

"Most certainly."

"What did you do then?"

"I descended to the parlor that opens off the main *patio*, and seated myself there to wait for them. At three o'clock, however, I went to my room, calling myself a fool for giving myself any uneasiness about them."

"In the morning, when they had not returned, what did you do then?"

"I called the members of our party together and told them about the circumstances. I said nothing, however, about my suspicions concerning the gambling-house, or about my having been there. We held a consultation, and it was the consensus of opinion that Hal was quite capable of caring for his sister as well as himself, and that nothing should be done about it at once. I remember that it was thought that they had gone out of town somewhere, thinking they could get back, and could not."

"So, in reality, nothing was done that day?"

"Nothing at all. That is, not until eight o'clock that evening. At that time I went to the chief of police and reported the matter to him."

"What was his idea?"

"He questioned me very closely and rather wisely, I thought. He showed a great deal of interest, and a great deal of ability in his manner of questioning. When he had finished, he gave it as his opinion that Hal and Rose had simply put up a job on us, and were playing a joke; just trying to frighten us. And I will confess that he more than half-convinced me that it might be true. At any rate, I felt better for the rest of that day."

"You did nothing more than that? Nothing more than to go to the chief of police?"

"Nothing save wander around and about the city like a monkey without a tail."

"Weren't the others getting frightened by that time?"

"You must understand one thing, Mr. Carter, and that is, if it had been any other member of the party than Hal and his sister, they would all have been badly rattled. But Hal was supposed to be a host unto himself. Both he and Rose speak Spanish perfectly, both are strong and self-reliant, and Hal alone is capable of handling two or three ordinary men with ease—half a dozen Mexicans, I should say. We knew that no accident had happened to them, for such a thing would have been reported to the police; and so we could only conclude that the chief of police was correct when he put it down as a practical joke. But I'll tell you this much right now: When the next morning came around, and they had not shown up and we had not heard from them, it was no joke—at least, to me. I went again to the chief."

"What did he have to say that time?"

"He looked very glum indeed about it. He questioned me more closely than he had the preceding day, and when he dismissed me he said that he would take the matter up at once."

"He did that, I am sure, for I know him as a very efficient officer."

"Yes, he did. He scoured the city, as only Mexican police know how to do it; and all the while I haunted his office, wild almost, with anxiety. That, I think, is about the end of my story."

CHAPTER V.

A POSSIBLE VICTIM OF A NAMELESS CRIME.

Nick Carter himself went to interview the chief of police later in the day, and was cordially received.

"I think I know why you have come," said the chief, before Nick had an opportunity to mention the subject of his call. "It is about the Chittenden matter; no?"

"Yes, chief. I arrived in the city this morning, accompanied by the father of those two young people."

"Yes, I knew you were here, and that a Mr. Chittenden was with you. It is a very puzzling case, señor."

"Will you tell me what you have done about it so far, chief?"

"If you mean what have I accomplished, I must answer, nothing."

"No; I don't mean that. I wish to know what has been done."

"Everything has been done that could be done, that is known to the police of Mexico. I have even instituted a

house-to-house search, and you know how thoroughly that can be done in this city."

"Yes."

"I can assure you that wherever that young man and his sister are at this moment, they are most certainly *not* in the City of Mexico."

"How about Tacabaya?"

"I have had Tacabaya searched as thoroughly as Mexico."

"And the other outlying towns as well?"

"No. I have not thought it necessary."

"We must search all Mexico, chief, until we find those two missing persons."

The chief shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't believe they are in Mexico," he said. "I mean the country, not the city."

"How would they have gotten out of Mexico without your knowledge?"

Again the chief gave an expressive shrug.

"There is only one method," he replied.

"Do you mean that they have been murdered?"

"That is the way it looks to me."

"In that case, there should have been some trace of their bodies."

"Bodies may be disposed of very easily if one knows how to do it. Would you like to have a frank expression of my opinion?"

"That is what I came here to get, chief."

"The young woman was very beautiful. I have seen her myself, and I know. I think she was about the most beautiful young creature I ever saw."

"Well?"

"I don't think I was alone in that opinion."

"Probably not."

"There are men in Mexico who would sell their souls to possess a woman like that."

"I am quite well aware of that fact, chief."

"Well, you asked for my opinion; you shall have it. I believe that Miss Chittenden's beauty has been the undoing of both herself and her brother. I believe that he was knocked on the head that night, or stabbed—anyhow, murdered—and that his sister was carried away into the country; perhaps to another State; possibly to one of the many great haciendas of Mexico. I believe that she was carried away into captivity, and that she will never be heard from again, at least until she is much older than she is now."

"Do such things happen in Mexico, chief?"

"Do you ask me a question like that? Don't you know? Why, there are old hidalgos and their descendants living in this country who would rather obtain a wife in that manner than in any other way."

"But, chief, it was not yet dark when those two young people were last seen."

"Oh, yes it was. It was getting along toward midnight when they were noticed last."

"Indeed! Then your information is better than mine."

"I suppose it is. They were seen at the gambling-house in Tacabaya, as late as half-past eleven."

"You know that positively, and yet have not been able to trace them from there?"

"I know it positively, and yet have not been able to trace them a foot from there."

"Will you tell me what you do know about their visit to that place?"

"Well, I suspected that they might have gone there, when I had my second talk with Douglass. In fact, he mentioned to me that the idea had occurred to him also, and that he went out there that night immediately after returning from the opera. I knew, of course, that he could not have obtained any information, so I went out there myself in person; I did not send one of my men."

"Well?"

"They were there that night. They arrived soon after eight, and left at or near half-past eleven. They kept to themselves and played but little. The young man took a flyer or two, just to pay his way, I suppose. The young woman did not offer to place a bet."

"No. She would not do that. It would be against her education. What else?"

"They contented themselves by strolling around the rooms; by looking on at the games; by wandering into the grounds and by studying with more or less interest the players themselves. That seems to be about the sum of what they did."

"Did you find if they engaged in conversation with any one while they were there, or if they made any acquaintances?"

"They were seen to hold quite an animatd conversation with a woman, about an hour or an hour and a half before they left the place. As far as I am able to ascertain, that is the only person except the regular attendants, to whom they spoke at all, while they were there."

"Did you find out who the woman is?"

"Certainly."

"And you have questioned her, of course?"

"Naturally."

"Will you tell me what she has to say about it?"

"She explains that she was attracted, as she entered the gambling-room, by the extraordinary beauty of Miss Chittenden, and that she spoke to her—in English, for she speaks English very well indeed. Miss Chittenden replied, and they talked together, she says, about ten minutes, upon no particular subject; just talked, as strangers who meet in that way will do. After that the woman took her seat at one of the tables, and forgot them in the excitement of play."

"Do you regard the story as entirely true?"

"Yes; it seems so. And, moreover, it tallies with the reports of the attendants."

"Who is the woman? I would like to have a talk with her if you see no objection."

"I don't think there could be any, if I send you to her. I will give you a card. She is Señora Del Puente, a widow—and a very rich one at that. She devotes one night each week to play and her seat at the monte-table is always reserved on that night."

"She lives in the city?"

"Part of the time. But she has a beautiful country home out at Coyocan. She is there now, I believe. Really, Mr. Carter, unless you are determined to talk with her, I think you only waste your time in going to see her."

"That is more than likely true, and yet, as the last person known to have engaged in conversation with them, I would like to have a talk with her."

The chief turned to his desk and wrote a few lines on a sheet of paper bearing the official heading of the department. This he gave to the detective.

"Coyocan is about half an hour out of the city," he said. "When you leave the train at the station, you have only to ask the first person you meet to direct you to the home of La Señora Del Puente. I am sure you will be well received. You will find her a very beautiful and a very attractive woman, although she must be fifty years old at least."

"Mexican women do not as a rule retain their beauty so long, do they?" asked Nick.

"She is not Mexican. She is Spanish. But the rule applies just the same, I suppose. Shall you go there to-day?"

"Yes; I think so. I can do it easily and get back before time for dining. Chief, haven't you anything to suggest to me in this search I am making?"

"No; honestly I have not. I will, of course, do anything in the world that can be done to assist you. In fact, I am keeping up the search now, myself, in every way possible, for the English embassy has taken hold of the matter, and it looks a little ugly against us to have such a thing happen."

"But I see that you are convinced in your own mind that nothing more can be done."

"I am, Mr. Carter. It is one of those mysteries which will be cleared up some day, but you and I will both be much older than we are now before that happens."

"You adhere, I suppose, to the opinion you expressed to me a few moments ago?"

"I do. I think that more than likely one of those rich old hacienderos from Guerra or Oaxaca was present in the gambling-room when Chittenden and his sister were there. If that is so, you may be sure that he had at least half a dozen men with him, waiting outside until it was his pleasure to quit the game. Such a man as that would only have to step outside a moment, call one of his men to him, take him to a window, point out the girl, and say, 'I want you to get her when she comes out and take her to my hacienda. If the young man interferes, kill him, or capture him also, and take him along until such time as you can dispose of him more easily.' Then he would return to the room and go on with his gambling as if there had been no interruption. He would not even look at the girl again that night, and therefore no suspicion could attach to him, and we have nothing to indicate to us who he might have been."

"But can't you find out if such a man—such a wild animal, I should have said—as you describe, was there that night?"

"I have already tried that—and have failed. Three such men—I mean men of that description, and it does not follow that they would commit such an act—were at the gambling-house that night, but none of them was known, and I cannot find out who any of them were or from whence they came. But it is the only way in which I can explain the mystery."

"Will you do me another favor, chief, in addition to this letter?"

"Anything at all I will be glad to do."

"Give me authority to question the people at that gambling-house; authority that will make them talk to me as if it were to you."

"I can do that easily. I will appoint you a special aid to the chief, and will give you a badge of authority. It may be serviceable to you in more ways than the one."

"You are right, chief, and I shall be greatly obliged."

"But all the same, I don't think you will find out anything more than I did."

"Nor do I; only two men have different methods of looking at things. Things that would impress you, might not affect me, and things that would have great weight with me, might not influence you at all."

"That is quite true. Here is the badge, and here is an official ring. You can carry that latter in your pocket, and put it on your finger only when you wish to show your authority. You will find that it is very potent."

"Have you thought it worth while, chief, to have a list made out of such hacienderos as might commit such a crime as you have named, and then to make a search among them?"

"I am having a partial one made out now. To have a complete one, and to follow it with a search as complete, would consume years. Rest assured, Mr. Carter, that we feel quite as deeply about this affair as you do, and that every effort will be made—is being made—to clear it up. The president has himself given orders to that effect."

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOMAN WHO SAW THEM LAST.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon of that day when the detective arrived at Coyocan and as the chief had prophesied he had no difficulty in being directed to the home of Señora Del Puente.

He had a feeling that he could not describe, that this woman who played at monte once a week with regularity, would be able to tell him something about the two missing ones that would be helpful.

At all events, she was the last person known to have conversed with them, and for that reason if for no other, it was worth the effort to discuss the matter with her.

Señora Del Puente received him pleasantly and read the note written by the chief with considerable attention. Then, in perfect English, she said:

"I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Carter. The chief of police tells me here that you wish to ask me some questions upon the same subject that he has already discussed with me. I can send my duenna away if you think it should be private."

"Oh, no, that is not at all necessary. The chief has, of course, explained to you about the mysterious disappearance of those two young persons with whom you talked, at Jenks'?"

"Yes."

"You thought them very handsome and attractive, did you not? Both of them?"

"I have never seen a young woman so beautiful, Mr. Carter; and as for the young man—I think if Heaven had given me a son like that, I should have been the happiest woman on earth. And I should have had just such a son, Mr. Carter."

"Then you can appreciate something about how their father must feel about the matter, señora?"

"I do. I do, indeed."

"Mr. Chittenden came to Mexico with me in the effort to find his children. It is in his behalf that I am working."

"Yes?" She turned away her head for a moment, and Nick could see her furtively wipe away a tear; but after a moment she turned a smiling countenance toward him again.

The chief had not exaggerated when he said that Señora Del Puente was both beautiful and attractive, despite her years. She was even more than either. She was almost fascinating. There was an indefinable charm about her that was felt on the moment of entering her presence.

"What is it that you wish to ask me?" she demanded presently.

"Will you tell me how it happened that you talked together at all that night?"

"Yes. I had just entered the room and was passing to my seat. You will not probably approve of my conduct, but I have a passion for play, and I indulge it once each week. I have a chair reserved for me on such nights."

"The chief gave me so to understand."

"I was passing to my seat when I was attracted by the remarkable beauty of the young woman, and I will confess it—by the handsome face of the young man, as well. In fact, although I am old enough to have been his mother, it was his face that attracted me first."

"That is quite natural, I think."

"I approached them and addressed the young lady. I said to her, 'I sincerely hope, my dear young lady, that it is not a passion for play that brought you here.' She replied, smiling brightly upon me, 'Oh, no, indeed! I have never seen the inside of a gambling-house before, and to-night I induced my brother to bring me here. We are only looking on.'

"I said, 'I am the Señora Del Puente, if you will permit me to introduce myself;' and she replied, 'I am Miss Chittenden, of London, England, and this is my brother, Mr. Harry Chittenden.' That was the manner in which the conversation began, sir."

"Do you recall anything more that was said? Anything in particular, I mean?"

"I recall many more trivial things, such as my explaining to them how the game of Mexican monte is played; but there was nothing in particular said. I think I asked them how long they had been in Mexico, and how long a time they intended to remain. I believe, also, that the young lady told me they had broken an engagement to attend the opera in order to go there, where I saw them."

"That is correct. They did. How long a time did you spend in conversation with them?"

"Certainly not more than five minutes altogether."

"Did you notice them again while they were in that house?"

"No; I am certain that I did not until they were leaving. After I took my seat at the table I became absorbed in my play and speedily forgot that there were two such persons in the world."

"You were not aware when they left the room to depart?"

"Yes, strangely enough, I think I was conscious of it. Like all gamblers, I am superstitious, and I had the feeling that their presence had brought me luck. I won steadily after I sat down, for a considerable time. Then, suddenly, I lost a large bet, and raising my eyes, I saw that Mr. Chittenden and his sister were leaving the room. I was so impressed with the idea that my luck would change then, that I stopped playing then and there."

"Even while they were leaving the room?"

"Yes."

"Did you also leave the building at once, or soon after that?"

"Almost at once."

"Did you see them again, outside the building?"

"No. I did not see them again. They had gone when I came outside."

"What time was that, señora?"

"I remember that it was twenty minutes past eleven o'clock."

"Your own carriage was there waiting, of course?"

"No. I went in the saddle. I always do so. I can ride all day, or all night, without tiring; and I always take three of my men with me as escort, so I have no fear."

"Can you offer something, madam, which might suggest to me a solution of this mystery?"

"Alas, no; unless—but that is too horrid to think about."

"What were you about to say, señora?"

"There are men who would love the possession of a wife of such extraordinary beauty as Miss Chittenden possesses; and there are men in Mexico who know no law but their own wills. There were several such at the gaming-tables that night. I saw more than one admiring glance cast in the direction of Miss Chittenden, Mr. Carter."

"By men whom you know, or would recognize again?"

"Not by men whom I ever saw before, but I might recognize them if I should see them again. It is impossible to say."

"The chief suggested something of the kind to me, but it seems incredible."

"I have known of such things happening in Mexico; not of late years, to be sure; but such things have happened."

"It is too horrible to contemplate."

"Horrible in one way, I grant you. I can assure you of one thing, however. When a young woman is carried off in that manner, she is given honorable marriage, although it is compulsory. But an haciendero wants a legitimate descendant to inherit his wealth."

"In such a case as you suggest, the young man would have been murdered?"

"Very likely."

"Can you make no more comforting suggestion than that, señora?"

"I am afraid not. That young man looked to me as if he would be a great fighter, if he were roused to use his strength. If there had been an ordinary attack in the street, there would have been a noise. Something would have been heard about it, so say nothing of the nearness of the police."

"How, then, do you suppose they were made captives?"

"Possibly they were lured into a carriage not their own—that is, if they went there in a carriage. That would not be necessary from Mexico City, as the cars run out there so often, but still I think they would have taken a carriage. Will you tell me how the father takes this bereavement?"

"Very bravely indeed, señora. It is breaking his heart, but there is never a murmur out of him."

"If you should tell him of this interview, will you say that he has my full sympathy?"

"I certainly will, and thank you. I will not trespass longer upon you, señora."

"Tut, tut! You are not trespassing at all. It is rarely that I have an opportunity to air my English, you know."

"You speak it very perfectly."

"I did when I was young, but now, sometimes I find that I am at a loss for a word. I wish, Mr. Carter, that I could do something to aid you in your search."

"Thank you. Tell me this: Do you remember if there was any other person than yourself who left the gaming-table at the same time you did, or within a very few minutes before?"

"Really, sir, I haven't the slightest recollection about it. I was, as I have said, absorbed in play, and it was only when I lost a bet and looked up hastily, that I discovered that they were leaving."

"How long a time do you suppose that to have been from the time you began to play?"

"A half-hour or more."

"And they stood there watching you all the time?"

"They must have done so. I think I was vaguely conscious of their presence; conscious of it without realizing that I was so. You understand?"

"Yes. When you passed outside the place to mount your horse, was there any noticeable evidence of recent excitement anywhere about?"

"Quite the contrary."

"One can see from the front of the gambling-house down the road almost to Chapultepec. Is it not so?"

"No. There is a turn in the road, if you will remember, perhaps two hundred of three hundred feet from there."

"I was only going to ask if you noticed a carriage in that direction, when you came out of the grounds?"

"No; I did not. But that does not assume that none was there. There might have been several without my noticing them."

"Your mind was still upon your game?"

"On the contrary, my mind at that time was upon those two young persons."

"Indeed. May I ask in what manner?"

"Oh, I was wishing that I were young again. I was wishing that I might renew my own youth and be as gloriously beautiful as that young woman—and win for a husband a handsome youth like that one. I was dreaming. I am romantic, as you have doubtless discovered. I have grown old in years much faster than in thought or desires and aspirations. I was beautiful, too, when I was young, like that Miss Chittenden; but not with beauty such as hers, for I was, as you see, dark. I think I was railing at fate, Mr. Carter. In a word, I was envious, envious of youth—just youth. It is the greatest thing in the world, only we never realize it till we have lost it."

She started from her chair with some evidence of excitement in her manner, and wondering just a little because of it, Nick also rose.

"Señora," he said, "I am very grateful to you for your graciousness this afternoon. I will go now."

"But you will come again, Mr. Carter, if you have any good news to tell me? I shall be anxious to hear about this affair."

"Thank you. I will see that you are informed if there should be good news to tell you."

With that he took his departure.

CHAPTER VII.

A REMARKABLE DISCOVERY.

During the two weeks that followed upon his talk with Señora Del Puente, the detective was indefatigable in his efforts to discover some trace of the lost Chittendens, but with all his skill and notwithstanding his long experience, he was unable to find a thing which offered any hope of clearing up the mystery.

With the aid of the chief of police, every public hack-driver in the city had been interviewed, and one of them had been forced to confess that he had driven the young people to Tacabaya that night; but he insisted that they had dismissed him and paid him when they arrived at the gambling-house, informing him, however, if he was there when they came out, he would be engaged again. But he said that he had secured another fare and had driven back to the city—which, by the way, is approximately six miles.

Nick interviewed the people at the gaming-house, under the authority granted him by the accommodating chief, but nothing more than the chief had already told him, could be elicited.

In every direction there seemed to be an opaque cloud between his inquiries and the solution of the mystery, and nowhere could he find a clue, or the suggestion of one.

At the end of the two weeks, one morning Nick and Chittenden and Douglass were seated again in the same room where they held their first conference. The father of the lost ones looked drawn and haggard, Douglass had grown perceptibly thinner and older, and even Nick's face was grave beyond anything that it had ever been before.

Against his own will he was beginning to adopt the theory of the chief of police concerning the disappearance of the young people—against his will, for in spite of all that had been said to him about it, he could not bring himself to believe that such a thing had really happened.

"Well, Mr. Carter," said the father presently, "what are we to do now?"

"I confess, Mr. Chittenden," replied the detective, "that I am almost at the end of my efforts—or rather of my wits to think."

"You are not disposed to abandon the search, are you?" asked Chittenden anxiously.

"Abandon it? No, sir. I will never abandon it now until I find those two young persons, or at least know what fate has been theirs. I will spend the balance of my life here in Mexico before I will give up beaten."

"Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Carter. I feared that you would become discouraged, and give up the case."

"Mr. Chittenden, I never gave up a case in my life, once I had started upon it. I shall not begin now."

"Thank you again."

"But I am impressed with the idea that we have got to search somewhere backward for your son and daughter."

"But what do you mean by searching backward?"

"I mean that I have arrived at the decision that the explanation of this mystery lies in the past—lies in some-

thing that has happened to Hal, or to Rose, or to you. Mr. Douglass, you have always been intimate with Hal, have you not?"

"As intimate as if we were own brothers; perhaps more so."

"If he had had an entanglement of any sort with a woman, do you think he would have told you about it?"

"I think he would; but even if he had not done so, I would have known it."

"How so?"

"Because I know him so well. He could not have kept it from me."

"I am not so sure about that. Young men are sometimes exceedingly crafty about such an affair."

"Nevertheless, I would take my oath, Mr. Carter, that nothing of the sort has ever come into Hal Chittenden's life. I have never seen the shadow of worry upon his brow—and I would have seen it and would have asked him about it bluntly, had it been there."

"You must not take offense at what I ask you now. Are you equally sure about Rose?"

"I reply in two words with all the force they can represent. I am."

"Mr. Chittenden, I ask you the same question, knowing that you understand my motive."

"My replies must be the same as Jack's, only with even more force than he has used, Mr. Carter. There has been no shadow upon the lives of either of my children."

"Then, Mr. Chittenden, we are driven back to yourself. We must search among your enemies."

"My enemies? I have none who would think of doing such a thing as this."

"Do you recall the story you told me in my office in New York about the daughter of the Spanish ambassador to France—the story that happened a little more than thirty years ago?"

"Yes."

"You told me that the young woman's name was Mercedes de Echeverria. You could not recall the name of the man she married."

"No; I could not: I really do not believe that I ever knew it. I was told, of course, but I did not heed it. If I ever knew it, I have forgotten it."

"I cabled yesterday morning to Spain for information respecting that young woman."

"You did? And why? Surely you do not connect or associate her with this matter."

"No. I cannot say that I do; but all the same I wish to assure myself that she could not have been associated with it."

"May I ask what message your cable contained?"

"I forwarded it through our ambassador here, to our ambassador at Madrid. I asked for information respecting Mercedes, the niece of Don Jose de Echeverria, formerly Ambassador from Spain to France. I requested the name of the man she married, and where she resided now, if living. I should receive a reply, I think, some time to-day."

Chittenden smiled sadly.

"I remember when I was a boy," he said, "that one of my favorite methods for finding a ball that had been lost in the tall grass, or for finding any lost article, was to get my bow and arrow and shoot an arrow into the air in the direction of the lost article, or toward the spot where it was supposed to be. This effort of yours reminds me of it."

"Let me ask," replied Nick, also smiling, "if the falling arrow did not frequently lead you to the lost ball?"

"It did, of a truth."

"Let us hope, then, that the arrow I have shot into the air will take us somewhere near the solution of this mystery. I did not tell you that the president sent for me yesterday."

"No."

"The chief told me that the president would like to see me. I went to the palace and was very graciously received. He is one of the finest men as well as one of the most remarkable characters on top of the earth, Mr. Chittenden."

"I quite believe you. What did he have to communicate?"

"He sent for me merely to discuss this case with me. He has taken a deep personal interest in the matter, and at this moment the police forces of the entire country are at work in the search for Hal and Rose. He is determined that the mystery shall be solved—as determined as you and I are."

"Did he have any theory to advance about it?"

"No. What new theories could be advanced? But he is determined that such things shall not be permitted to happen in this country. He is determined that this matter shall be explained—and as speedily as possible."

"Mr. Carter, I do not wish you to assume that I have given up hope, when I say what I am about to, for I

have not. But I greatly fear that my children have been murdered."

"Well, *I do not!* I can't! I cannot bring myself to such a belief. And now I wish to make a suggestion to you, Mr. Chittenden."

"Yes? What is it?" with a smile.

"You stick too closely to this hotel. You brood too much. I want you to begin to take an active part in the search. I want you to stir about somewhat."

"Very well. What shall I do? I would be only too glad to help, if I could."

"I am going now, within a few minutes, out to Coyocan, to call upon that Señora Del Puente, who was the last person to talk with Hal and Rose—who was the last to see them, so far as we know. I want you to go with me."

"I will be very glad to do so."

"Then we will start at once. She expressed a great deal of sympathy for you, and she is a very charming woman. I think it will be pleasant for you to meet her."

"Very well. I will go."

"Do you want me to go along?" asked Douglass.

"No," replied Nick. "I want you to remain here to receive the reply to my cable, if it should come. We will return in two or three hours."

"What do you expect to accomplish by making this call?" asked Chittenden.

"Nothing at all, to tell you the truth, save to ascertain if the señora has recalled to her mind the faces or the names of any of the company that were at the gambling-house that night—that, and to get you out and give you something else to think about."

"I am afraid the last part of your wish is a hopeless task. I can think of nothing else but my missing children."

"I know. Well, come along with me now, anyhow. We should arrive there by eleven, and Mr. Douglass, we should be back here by one o'clock, or two, at the latest."

"Very well."

And so Nick and Chittenden went to Coyocan together.

But a disappointment awaited them when they arrived at the residence of Señora Del Puente, for she was not at home. The *portero* who received them at the entrance informed the detective that the señora had gone to her hacienda in the country, and was not expected to return for some time.

"How long has she been away?" asked the detective, more for want of something to say than because the reply could hold any interest for him.

"Two weeks, señor," was the answer.

"Ah," said Nick. "It was two weeks ago to-day that I was here. Do you remember me?"

"Si, señor. Perfectly well. The señora went away the following morning after you were here."

"I will leave my card for her," said the detective. "Where is her hacienda located?"

"In the State of Michoacan, señor. I do not know where."

They returned to the station then, and waited there for the train to take them back to the city; and while they were waiting, the detective murmured aloud:

"It is rather strange that she should have gone away the very day after my call upon her, and that, too, after especially requesting me to keep her informed about the search. But yet, I do not know why I should regard it as strange, either."

Chittenden made no reply to the remark, and presently they boarded the train and were taken back to the City of Mexico, where they hurried from the station to the hotel.

As they entered their rooms, Douglass came forward with an envelope in his hand.

"It is the cable," he said. "It was just sent here from the embassy."

Nick thanked him, and broke the seal; and as he read he frowned, then smiled; then he frowned again. Then he put the message in his pocket and said nothing. But this is what it contained:

"Mercedes de Echeverria married Don Julio del Puente, who was later appointed Minister to Mexico, where he died. It is thought that his widow still resides in that country, although nothing definite is known about her. Don Julio was a very rich man, and must have left a large estate. There were no children."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CLUE BY CABLE FROM MADRID.

"So!" the detective muttered to himself as soon as he found himself alone in his own room. "The Señora Del Puente turns out to be Mercedes de Echeverria. It is a remarkable circumstance to say the least. A remarkable circumstance—and I think I will lose no time in going to

the bottom of it. Let me try to recall some of the things that woman said to me.

"Ummm! She was first attracted to them, not so much by the beauty of the young woman as by the face of the young man. I have never asked Chittenden if Hal looks as he did when he was of that age, but it is to be assumed that he does. At the time Joseph Chittenden knew Mercedes de Echeverria he was about two years younger than Hal is now.

"The señora also said to me: 'I think if Heaven had given me such a son as that I would have been the happiest woman on earth. *And I should have had such a son, Mr. Carter.*' By Jove! I begin to think that my intuitive reasoning about this case, so far back as before I left New York to come here, was the correct solution of it after all.

"Spanish women are remarkable for their jealousies. I have heard that they never get over a hard case of it.

"Mercedes de Echeverria was passionately in love with young Joseph Chittenden, more than thirty years ago; I must assume that. She found it hard to forgive him when he left her without a word, at the command of his father—and later, when he had married, and she had also become a wife, and they met, she replied to his question if she remembered their last meeting, by saying: 'I have not forgotten, and some day perhaps you will have cause to remember it, also.'

"She meant by that that she would get even with him some day, if the opportunity ever came her way. That is what she meant if she meant anything at all.

"Let me suppose that I was standing there in that gambling-room, looking on, at the time when the señora entered it and discovered young Chittenden and his sister standing there. I would have seen her give a violent start, for the face of young Chittenden carried her back thirty years in her life, and in fancy she saw her old lover; not his son.

"But she wished to be assured of it, and so she went forward and spoke to them, presently introducing herself by name in order that they would be compelled to tell theirs.

"Then she was satisfied. Instead of going at once to her seat at the gaming-table, she must have gone outside for a moment before beginning to play.

"She could easily have bribed Hal Chittenden's hackman to leave the place, and she could easily have substituted a carriage of her own to take its place; and the new driver could have said to Hal, when he came out with his sister, that the other driver had been taken ill, or one of his horses had been, and that he had taken his place. Hal would have thought nothing strange about such a circumstance.

"And more than likely the señora lied to me when she said that she always went to the place on horseback. She probably merely rode home that night on one of the horses that one of her men had ridden to the place.

"After making her arrangements for the abduction, she returned to the gambling-room, and while pretending to become absorbed in her play, she was furtively watching Hal and his sister all the time.

"The proof of that is in the fact that she left the table the moment they took their departure. She wanted personally to see that her quickly laid plans did not miscarry."

The detective started to his feet, and seizing his hat, went out without saying a word to either of his friends; and he hurried directly to the office of the chief of police, fortunately finding him at his desk.

"Chief," he said, as soon as he entered, "do you think you could send out one of your men and have that hack-driver who took young Chittenden and his sister to Tacabaya brought here at once?"

"He ought to be found readily enough, unless he happens to be driving off somewhere with passengers. His stand is at the corner of Cante and San Francisco Streets—right around the corner from the Iturbide hotel."

"Yes; I know. Will you send for him?"

"Certainly. What have you discovered that is new? For I see that you have lighted upon something."

"I have, chief; and I will tell you about it presently. But if it is all the same to you, I would like to take you into my confidence rather slowly, so to speak. I want an unbiased opinion from you on several points, first."

"Go ahead."

One of his men entered at that moment, in response to his ring, and was sent after the driver post-haste.

"Now, Mr. Carter," said the chief, when they were alone.

"I see that you have a telephone at your elbow, chief. I suppose there is also a telephone in the gambling-house at Tacabaya, isn't there?"

"Yes."

"Will you do me the favor to call them up and ask this question: 'Has Señora Del Puente been playing

regularly at your establishment of late?' If the answer is that she has not, then find out if she has played there at all since the night of the disappearances."

"Humph!" said the chief. "I don't in the least know what you are getting at, but—wait a moment."

He seized the telephone and did as requested; and there followed some considerable conversation between him and the manager of the gambling-house. Presently he put aside the instrument and turned to Nick with a smile.

"The señora *has not* played there in that house since that night, though I don't know how you could have guessed it," he said.

"I will tell you all about that presently. What else was said?"

"Only that her chair at the table is still reserved for her, as she has sent no orders to the contrary. They have an understanding that if she does not appear to claim her seat, she pays a forfeit of fifty dollars. She has now lost five forfeits."

"Indeed! It must be a strong inducement, chief, that can keep the señora away from her favorite occupation; don't you think so?"

"I do, indeed."

"I went out to Coyocan to see her this morning. She was not at home."

"No? Where had she gone?"

"To a hacienda she owns somewhere in the State of Michoacan. Can you tell me where that hacienda is located?"

"No; but I can easily find out. In Michoacan, you say?"

"Yes."

The chief rang his bell again, and when the clerk appeared, said to him:

"Ascertain for me as quickly as possible the exact location in the State of Michoacan, of an hacienda owned by Señora Del Puente. Write your information on a slip of paper, together with full directions for getting there by the shortest route possible."

The clerk had only just left the room to obtain the information, when the door opened again, and the man who had been sent out after the driver, returned with him and ushered the man into the room.

"Stand there!" said Nick sternly, when the chief signified that he was to do the talking. "Your name is Manuel Montez, is it not?"

"Si, señor."

"You are the man who drove the two young persons who have disappeared to Tacabaya?"

"Si, señor."

"Well, you lied to the chief and to me about that night. Now, I want you to tell us the truth about it—unless you wish your back against a wall an a bullet for your supper."

"Ah, señor——"

"Silence until I have finished! You were bribed that night to return to the city and not to wait for your two passengers, being assured that another carriage would receive them. Is not that the truth?"

"Si, señor. Oh, sir, I did not see any harm in accepting——"

"Silence. Answer my questions. Do not talk. Was it a woman who bribed you?"

"No, sir. It was a man."

"An *hombre,* not a *caballero?* A man; not a gentleman?"

"Yes, sir."

"What sort of a man?"

"A *charro*—a man from the country."

"In whose service was he?"

"I do not know, señor."

"Are you lying to me again?"

"No, señor; I am telling the truth now."

"Why did you not tell the truth in the first place?"

"I was afraid, señor. I was frightened after I heard of the disappearance of those two young people."

"Had you ever seen the man before, who did the bribing?"

"I do not think so, señor."

"Just before he bribed you to leave the place, did you observe him in conversation with a woman?"

"No, señor. I did not see him at all until he came to me with the offer that I should go away without my passengers."

"You have no idea where he was from? To what estate he belongs?"

"No, señor."

"Tell me exactly what he said to you."

"He said: 'Here are ten dollars, hombre, if you turn your horses about and drive back to the city at once, and forget that you have been here at all. Your passengers will be taken care of.'"

"And you accepted the ten dollars and drove away, did you?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do for you. Chief, I have finished with him. He is at your disposal now."

For reply the chief turned to the officer who brought the driver in, and said to him:

"Take Montez to Belem and lock him up, incommunicado, for thirty days. See that his license is taken from him. That will do. Take him away."

The detective laughed.

"Chief, don't you even give those fellows the benefit of a court trial?" he asked.

"No. What would be the use. He is guilty. He will obtain another license when he comes out, and go to driving again as if nothing had happened; and the first time he is offered another bribe, he will accept it, also, as if nothing had happened. We know how to deal with our people, Carter."

"So I see."

"And now, do you mean to tell me that Señora Del Puente is responsible for these disappearances? Do you mean to tell me that?"

"I mean to tell you that everything points to her as being the guilty one, but that as yet I have no proof of it. And I wish to ask you not to make any move in the matter until I have investigated a little further."

"Oh, all right. Only tell me where you discovered your clue."

"I found it in the city of Madrid, in Spain. It was sent to me by cable, chief," was the smiling and rather puzzling reply.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER PREPARES A LITTLE PLAN.

The detective then took the chief entirely into his confidence, and he related every circumstance that had led him to suppose that the woman who was once Mercedes de Echeverria might be responsible for the mysterious happenings of that night at the gambling-house.

"It was my first idea about the case," he said, "even before we left New York to come here, but I dismissed it from my mind as too remote."

"I don't blame you for that. I doubt if I should have thought of it again at all."

"You see, it was more than thirty years ago that the love episode occurred between Mercedes de Echeverria and Joseph Chittenden. It happened in Paris, and we are in Mexico. It seemed almost impossible to connect the two. But when everything else failed, I made up my mind that I would at least ascertain what became of Mercedes de Echeverria, and who it was she married. There is the cable I received," and he passed it over to the chief.

"And yet," said the chief, after he had studied it for a moment in silence, "there is the possibility that even now you are entirely mistaken."

"There is a very large possibility that I am, chief. I will admit that."

"Supposing your suspicions—and I will admit that there are sufficient grounds for them—sunpposing them to be true, what could have been the object of the señora in abducting young Chittenden and his sister?"

"Who can tell that? Who can read the mind of a revengeful woman?"

"I have never yet discovered anybody who could."

"Nor I."

"I don't think it is likely that she would—er—put them out of the way; do you?"

"I don't know what she would do. It may be that having gotten them in her power, she is merely detaining them in order to make their father suffer; and it may be that she is entirely innocent of the whole affair. When I think of that woman, of the manner in which she received me when I called upon her, of her sweet face and matchless manner, I cannot believe it possible that she could have done it. And yet—there are the facts. You know them as well as I do now."

"What is your idea as to what should be done next, Mr. Carter?" asked the chief.

"I think I shall go to Michoacan—to the hacienda of Señora Del Puente, as soon as possible. Ah, here is your clerk now, with the information about it."

The chief took the paper and passed it to the detective without glancing at it.

"It is for you," he said. "Read it aloud."

"'The Hacienda del Montanas,'" read the detective. "'To get there, go by rail to Morelia, and thence due east, along a mountain-trail by horseback, thirty-five kilometers.' That is approximately thirty miles, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Is there a train by which I could start to-night, chief?"

"You will make almost as good time and travel much more comfortably by starting in the morning. But you must not think of going alone."

"No? Why not?"

"Because the señora's men would wipe you off the face of the earth before you could get there. They would think no more of putting you out of the way to serve their mistress than I would of killing that fly. You must have an escort when you go there."

"Oh, very well, if you think so."

"I will give you a letter to the Captain of Rurales, at Morelia. He will provide you with all the men you want, and perhaps accompany you himself. There won't be any wiping off the earth if you have a few Rurales behind you."

"I quite understand that."

"And it may be, Carter, that you will not find the young people there."

"That is my present fear."

"Even if the señora abducted them, even if she is the guilty party, she would provide a safe place to keep them. And the hacienda would hardly be that, once we got upon her track."

"But you will admit that no time should be lost in making the investigation?"

"Certainly."

They were interrupted at that moment by the ringing of the telephone-bell, and immediately when the chief placed the receiver at his ear he became interested.

Nick heard him say, "Is that so?" "Thank you." "I am very glad that you told me about it." "No; there is nothing important; at least, not at present. Let things go on precisely as if I had not communicated with you."

He hung up the receiver then, and turned a smiling countenance to the detective.

"It was the manager of the gambling-house," he explained. "He called me up to tell me that he has just received a letter from Señora Del Puente, inclosing a check for her forfeit, and stating that she would occupy her seat as usual to-night. What do you think about that?"

"I think that I will visit the gambling-house myself. I only wish you could accompany us, chief."

"There is no reason why I should not do so. But 'us'—whom do you mean by us?"

"I shall take Mr. Chittenden with me."

"Ah; the father."

"Yes; but more than that; the old-time lover of Mercedes de Echeverria."

"Good! Excellent. You will bring them together, face to face?"

"Certainly."

"And without previous warning to either of them?"

"Assuredly."

"It is a good idea. I would like to see the meeting, and what comes of it."

"Will you come to the hotel to ride out there with us?"

"Yes. At eight-thirty. Will that do?"

"Yes. We will make a party of four. Douglass, Chittenden, you, and myself."

"Good. And in the morning you will go to Michoacan?"

"To-night must determine that."

"Mr. Carter, unless I greatly err in my estimate of the señora, you will find her thoroughly on her guard and prepared at every point to meet you; that is, assuming that she is guilty."

"I believe that, also."

"How will you do when you arrive at Tacabaya? Will you confront them with each other at the gaming-table?"

"No; I think not. I will arrange to bring their meeting about in some other manner. I do not now know just how I will do it. It will depend largely upon circumstances."

"It will be an interesting event at least, even if the woman is entirely innocent of this affair. Lovers reunited after thirty years, eh? When one is a widower and the other a widow. It is an interesting setting for a stage; no?"

"Quite so."

"By the way, I received another communication from the president this morning asking me if there was any new information respecting your case. Shall I inform him of what you have discovered?"

"Not yet, chief. I think we had better keep the matter to ourselves until it has developed a little further."

"And I quite agree with you."

"Moreover, chief, unless the meeting to-night brings about a confession from the señora, to Mr. Chittenden, I would prefer to keep the facts from him for the present; and from Douglass as well."

"And why?"

"Because if that woman did steal them away, we don't

know what she may have done to them, or with them. I hardly think she is revengeful enough to have murdered them, or even to have injured them; but you cannot tell what has happened."

"That is true."

"I will have some little difficulty in inducing Mr. Chittenden to visit a gambling-house, for he is totally opposed to such things."

"Then why inform him where you are taking him? Don't let him know about it until you walk into the place together."

"No; that won't do. He wouldn't like that, and he would turn on his heel and depart without a word."

"Oh, well, I will leave all the arrangements to you. You can bring it about in some manner that will be satisfactory."

Nick hurried back again to the hotel, and presently, with his two companions, he went to the café of the San Carlos for dinner. It was while they were dining that he broached the subject of the gambling-house.

"Mr. Chittenden," he said, "I want you and Douglass to go with me to-night to a place which you may not relish visiting."

"Not the morgue, Mr. Carter?" exclaimed the father, startled so that he turned paler than he had been before. "I hope nothing has——"

"No, no, no! To the gambling-house from which Hal and his sister disappeared."

"I see no objections to going there, Mr. Carter. I have had a wish that you would take me there."

"Then why haven't you mentioned it? I would have done so at any time."

"I have thought it was best to leave you entirely unencumbered by any expressed desires of mine. I have not wished to interfere with you. But you have seemed brighter to-day, Mr. Carter, and the very appearance of it has given me hope. Have you discovered something?"

"I have had reason to believe that I am on the eve of making a discovery," replied the detective evasively.

"You have found some sort of a clue?"

"I have discovered the suggestion of one. I would rather not tell you about it until I am more certain of my premises."

"Very well. As you please. I thought that possibly this visit to the gambling-house had a well-defined reason behind it."

"It has, Mr. Chittenden, else I should not ask you to go there."

"And you are not prepared to tell me what it is?"

"It is too indefinite as yet, if you will excuse me from explaining fully, sir."

"I have left everything entirely in your hands from the start, Mr. Carter. I am quite willing to do so yet."

"Thank you."

"In spite of my anguish and sorrow, I have ever had the feeling that sooner or later you will bring your search to a successful issue; and in spite of all my misgivings, there is a something within me that tells me my children will be restored to me."

"Your confidence in me is very complete, sir."

CHAPTER X.

THE ENCOUNTER AT THE GAMBLING-HOUSE.

The gambling-house at Tacabaya was that night in a blaze of glory, and also it seemed to Nick Carter, as they entered, that the attendance was unusually large. The three monte-tables and the faro-table were surrounded three deep and the hush of expectancy which pervades a room where gamblers are at their games, was manifest.

At one of the monte-tables, there was a vacant chair over which other players leaned; but the detective knew at once that Señora Del Puente had not yet arrived, although it was time for her to appear.

The chief, with his hat pulled down over his eyes and dressed in citizen's clothes, led the way into the room, and he was followed in turn by Nick, who walked beside Chittenden, while Douglass brought up the rear.

The quartet paused for only a moment in the gambling-room, and then passed on to a parlor which was more or less private in its nature, and which was now deserted as they entered it.

"Mr. Chittenden," he said then, "I am going to ask you to wait for me here; that is, to wait here until I summon you, or until I come for you. The games, of course, have no interest for you."

"None whatever. I am quite content to await you here, Mr. Carter."

"The chief will, I think, keep you company, at least for the present."

"He need not. I am quite content. I would much rather be here than out there among the gamesters."

"Douglass," said Nick, "you and I will return to the gaming-room, and after that you may amuse yourself as you see fit. If you care to take a whirl at one of the games, do so."

"Oh, I'll play a little. I'm not averse to it—if you will let me know when you want me, Carter."

"Sure. Amuse yourself as you see fit. If I should want you, which is not likely, I will call you."

Nick returned then to the gaming-room, followed by Douglass, and the chief, as well; and when Douglass had left them to go to one of the tables, the chief said to Nick:

"I will keep back out of sight, and when you take the señora in to see the old man, I will not be far off; but I would rather witness that scene without their knowledge, Carter."

"So would I, if it can be made possible."

They separated then, and the detective took his stand near the entrance where he knew that the señora would come in; but it was nearly half an hour before she appeared.

She looked, however, as bright and attractive as ever, and she was making straight for the table and her accustomed seat, when Nick Carter stepped forward and spoke to her.

He did it exactly as if their meeting were an accidental one; not at all as if he had been awaiting her coming.

"Ah, señora," he said, lifting his hat and bowing before her, "this is indeed a fortunate meeting. I did myself the honor to call upon you to-day, but only to be told that you were absent from home, and that it was not known when you would return."

"Mr. Carter!" she exclaimed. "This is indeed a pleasure. I am very sorry that I was not at home to receive you. I have been at my hacienda, near Morelia, attending to some business matters that needed me. What a crowd there is here to-night, to be sure."

"Yes, indeed."

"I suppose you recalled the fact that this is my regular night, and thought you might find me here?" she said, with a rising inflection in her voice.

"I remembered that it was your night, yes; but I also remembered that you were away," he replied evasively. "Do you intend to force your way through that crowd to your chair, in order to play, señora?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and smiled.

"It hardly seems worth while, does it?" she replied. "But you see I have been away some time. I have not played for weeks, and the fever is hard upon me. However, now that you are here, I will wait a while before I begin."

"That is very kind of you, señora, to take pity upon my loneliness."

"It was also kind of you to call upon me to-day. I am very sorry indeed that I was not at home. If you had only been a day later!"

"Yes," he replied, fancying there was more expressed in her regret that he was not a day later, than appeared on the surface. It was evident to him that she regretted it because if he *had* been a day later, he might not have known that she had been absent. "Shall we stroll about a bit, señora?"

"If you like. This room is insufferably warm. There is a parlor near at hand. Let us go there. And now tell me; you promised to call upon me when you had good news to tell. Have you succeeded in your quest, or have you hopes of immediate success?"

She looked straight at him with her wonderful eyes as she asked the question, and Nick caught himself wondering if this woman could be really guilty of that abduction.

"I have not succeeded in my quest," he responded. "Indeed, success seems to be as elusive as ever. It was in the hope that you could offer some suggestions for me to work upon, that I ventured out to Coyocan to-day."

"I wish—indeed I wish that I might aid you," she said, as they reached the doorway to the parlor where Mr. Chittenden was waiting; and Nick stepped back to permit her to pass in ahead of him. Then instantly he caught up with her—before she could discover that another person was seated near one of the windows of the room, and he added:

"I neglected to tell you, señora, that I am not alone here to-night. This gentleman"—Mr. Chittenden rose and turned about, facing them—"the father of our young friends, came with me." He was watching the señora narrowly while he talked, and also keeping half an eye upon Chittenden. "I beg that you will permit me to present him to you. Mr. Chittenden, the——"

He got no further in his introduction, for Joseph Chittenden, when he turned about and saw who was with the

detective, had started strangely, and as if he was not sure that his eyes did not deceive him; but now he stepped forward quickly, and with extended hand, exclaimed:

"Mercedes! Mercedes! Surely it cannot be you!"

She was smiling up at him with a suspicion of moisture in her wonderful eyes; but she was otherwise unmoved. It was exactly as if Nick had told her that Joseph Chittenden was waiting in that room to meet her. She seemed not in the least startled; not in the least surprised.

She extended her hand quickly and placed it in Chittenden's; and she said, calmly smiling:

"Joseph, this is a great pleasure indeed. I knew that you were in the city. Mr. Carter informed me of the fact at our last meeting, which was also our first. I should have sent you an invitation to call upon me at once, only I was called out of the city and have only returned to-day. But I should have sent to you to-morrow. Mr. Carter, you are surprised that Mr. Chittenden and I are old friends?"

"It is amazing," replied Nick. "It is even more amazing, señora, that you did not inform me of the fact when I told you the name of my companion in Mexico."

"I was not sure then that I cared to have Mr. Chittenden know that I was here," she replied simply. "I was not sure that I wished to meet him again."

"Ah! Indeed. Excuse me. But the son and daughter. Surely, when you met them, and they told you their names, you knew whose children they were?"

"I did, of course. I knew before they told me their names, for young Harry is the image of what his father was, thirty-three years ago. You observe, Joseph, that I recall perfectly the lapse of time."

"Yes, Mercedes; and upon my soul that time has changed you but little. You are a young woman yet."

"I ceased to live, three and thirty years ago, Joseph; that is why, I suppose. It is a case almost of suspended animation; and one could not grow old under such circumstances. But you have changed, José. You have changed greatly."

"Ah, yes, I suppose so. I have changed more, I suspect, during the last two months, than in all the years that preceded them. You have been told of my great trouble, Mercedes?"

"Yes. My heart bleeds for you, José."

"I know it does. I know it must. My son and my daughter are all the world to me. But you have seen them. You saw them here the night they disappeared. Indeed, you were the very last person to see them and talk with them."

Nick had been moving softly backward, and now he passed behind the portières and disappeared, leaving them both unconscious of his absence until in replying to Chittenden's last remark, the señora turned to seek confirmation of the detective. Then she discovered that he was not there. She was saying, in reply to Chittenden:

"Yes, I met them and talked with them. I was the last to see them, as you say. Mr. Carter—ah, he has gone and left us alone. How thoughtful of him, to be sure! Your daughter is very beautiful, José, and your son is—is what you were at his age."

"Do you think so, really?"

"It was as if I had gone backward thirty-three years when I entered the outer rooms and saw him standing there that night. I caught my breath, and rubbed my eyes, at first. Then I knew at once who he must be."

"It is to be regretted that you did not tell them of our old friendship, Mercedes."

"Is it? I'm not sure about that, José. I felt like claiming them for my own children. They should have been my children, Joseph. It is I who should have been their mother."

"Don't, Mercedes. Pray, do not speak so."

"Do you recall our last meeting, Joseph?"

"Perfectly well."

"Do you remember that then you asked me that same question? Asked me if I remembered the last meeting between us?"

"Yes; I remember it."

"Do you also remember my reply?"

"I recall it word for word. I thought about it for years afterward, and it troubled me in a vague sort of way. But later I forgot it."

"I told you, 'No, I have not forgotten, and some day you will have cause to remember it, also.' Those were my words, were they not?"

"Exactly your words."

"But there has never been any cause, has there?"

"None; save the memory of your beautiful face, Mercedes. That has never wholly left me."

"Fie, Joseph! This is a poor time to pay trite compliments."

"I had no thought of doing so when I said what I did. You were my first real love, Mercedes. A man never forgets his first real love."

"No? You amaze me! Then he certainly has the power to steel his heart wonderfully against her memory. But let us change the subject. You seemed surprised when you saw me to-night. Why was that? Surely Mr. Carter must have told you about his call upon me, and you must have known that Señora Del Puente was Mercedes de Echeverria."

"Honestly, Mercedes, I did not. When we met in Madrid that time, shortly after we were both married, I was so flustered that I did not catch your name. I have never known what it was."

"Nor cared to inquire?"

"I did not inquire."

She tapped him with her fan and smiled into his eyes bewitchingly, for she was a bewitching woman; and she drew him to a settee, motioned him to be seated, and then dropped down beside him.

CHAPTER XI.

BRIDGING THE GULF OF YEARS.

"Look at me, Joseph," she said to him.

"Yes, Mercedes," he replied.

"Do you remember that in Paris once you asked me to be your wife, and that I said 'Yes'?"

"I remember. But why speak of a subject now that must be painful to us both?"

"I wish to refer to that time, José. I love to call you by the Spanish name I used to make use of then. Do you remember our parting, the last time we saw each other, at that time, my friend?"

"Yes, Mercedes. I remember that I acted the part of a cad. It is very painful to me to recall it."

"Do you remember that you said you would write home to your father at once, and secure his consent, in order that you might properly make your approaches to my father? Do you remember that?"

"How could I possibly forget it?"

"And do you remember also that I trusted you? Trusted you with all my heart and soul. Do you remember that I was beautiful—and good? That you were the only man who had ever been permitted to utter a word of love to me, and that I had given you all my young heart, all my rich endowment of love, all my trust and confidence? Do you remember that I loved you to adoration? Do you know that when I knelt before my shrine at night all my prayers were for you—for you? Do you remember how madly I loved you, and how you swore eternal love and fealty to me? Do you remember?"

Mr. Chittenden had buried his face in his hands now, and his great frame trembled under the lashing weight of her words.

"Do you remember?" she asked again, bending nearer to him, so that her breath fanned his cheek; and she put out a tentative hand and rested it upon his arm. "Answer me, please."

"Of course I remember, Mercedes. As you are now, it seems but yesterday that we parted so," he replied, raising his face from his hands and fixing his gaze—a sorrowful gaze it was—upon her.

"And it is but yesterday," she sighed. "Only yesterday, but oh, how long has been the night that has intervened. You have grown gray with the length of it, and I have grown older and wiser, I hope. I did not know that you were a widower, José, but I have always believed that some day you would return to me."

"You have—you have believed that, Mercedes?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Because I was always drawing you, drawing you, as the sun draws water from the sea. And now, at last, you are here."

Suddenly she started to her feet and leaped away from him. Then she turned and faced him, but with a new light in her eyes.

"But what am I saying?" she cried out. "Of what am I thinking! I am selfish, selfish! I have forgotten your great misery, in my own great joy at seeing you again. Listen for yet another moment, José. When I knew that you were here, I went away into the country—to my hacienda in the State of Michoacan. I went there to think. To think about you. I went there to decide, if I could, whether I would permit myself to meet you again. To-morrow I should have sent for you, but I find you here to-night, awaiting me. I think that somehow Mr. Carter has discovered that we were once friends—lovers, indeed. I think that he has brought this meeting about purposely."

Chittenden rose from the settee also, and stood facing her.

"I am forgetting your misery in my own great joy," she repeated.

"Mercedes," he said, and he stretched out his arms toward her, "come to me and help me to bear it. Let us say that our parting was but yesterday, and that I have come to redeem my promise. You have said that my children should also have been your children, and I say to you now, let them be your children. Come to me, Mercedes. Help me to find them. It won't be long now before they will both leave me—until I am alone, for they will presently make other ties. Let us bridge over the gulf of years, Mercedes. I am fifty-three years old, you are not yet fifty. Surely we are both young yet. Shall it be so, Mercedes? Shall it be so?"

For a moment she stood quite still, gazing at him with her eyes shining like stars, and with so much of the glory of love in her face that it looked almost like the face of a girl. Then she took a step forward and placed both hands on his shoulders.

"Are you sure, José, that you are quite in earnest in what you say?" she asked.

"Yes; oh, yes."

"Then come to me to-morrow, at my house in Coyocan; come at noon, or soon after it, and repeat your question. I will have my answer ready then."

She slipped away from him somehow then, and glided toward the door. In another instant she had passed through it and was gone; and Chittenden stood where she left him, staring at the curtains she had flung aside in order to pass out, and which had now fallen into place again.

Presently he sighed deeply, and dropped back again upon the settee, covering his face with his hands as he had done once before that night.

He did not know that Nick Carter and the chief had both been witnesses to the entire scene, and that the detective had glided rapidly after the señora when she left the house, and now stood in a shadow, watching her as she entered her closed carriage, drawn by four half-wild horses, and was whirled away followed by half a dozen *charros* as escort.

When Nick saw her go he turned away and hurried to the gaming-room where he called Douglass away from the tables and said to him:

"Go to Mr. Chittenden, Douglass. He is where we left him. Ask him no questions about what has happened to-night. Tell him that I have sent you to take him back to the hotel. That is all."

"What shall you do, Carter?"

"I shall be busy for the balance of the night. Go now, before he comes here in search of us."

Nick watched them from a shadow as they entered the carriage that had brought them there and were driven away; then he turned to the chief who stood beside him.

"You heard it all, chief?" he asked. "You were a witness to that scene?"

"Yes."

"What do you think about it?"

"I don't know what to think, Carter. Unless that woman is possessed of a dual personality, she is not the one who abducted those two young people, and we are as far from a solution of the mystery as ever."

The detective shook his head in great perplexity.

"I am going to find out the truth with the least possible delay," he said. "I can still catch that night train to Morelia, can't I?"

"Yes; I think so, if you hurry."

"You can wire to the captain of Rurales there to assist me. I will go to him and tell him that I come from you."

"I think it is a wild-goose chase, Mr. Carter."

"Possibly it is. One cannot tell. Come, will you accompany me to the train?"

"Yes."

They found a carriage to take them to the station, and were driven rapidly away; and Nick arrived just in time to board the train for Morelia.

As he left the carriage he called out to the chief:

"Do me the favor to place one of your best men on guard over Chittenden to-morrow. Let him be followed when he goes to Coyocan, and see that nothing happens to him, will you?"

"I will."

"I will wire you of results, and return here as soon as possible."

It was noon of the day following when he arrived at Morelia, and he sought at once the Jefe Politico of the district, and was by him directed to the place where he would find the captain of Rurales—Captain Sanchez, his name was; and Nick found him to be a young man of remarkable personality, who looked as though he would not flinch at facing any force opposed to him.

"The chief of police of Mexico City has telegraphed to me to give you every assistance, and to put myself and my men under your immediate orders, Señor Carter," he said. "I need only add that I am at your disposal."

"Do you know the Hacienda del Montanas, captain?" asked the detective.

"Perfectly well. It is about thirty-five kilometers from here, in the mountains."

"That is my destination, and I wish to make a thorough search of the place. I happen to know that the señora who owns it is absent just now, and I wish to search it so thoroughly that not a child could be hidden from us there. Do you think it can be done?"

"Certainly it can be done. But search the señora's place? Pardon me, sir, but may I ask why?"

"You have heard about the disappearance of two young people from the City of Mexico? Or, rather, they were last seen at the gambling-house in Tacabaya? Chittenden, is the name."

"Yes; I have heard about it. We have received instructions about that matter."

"I have some reason to suspect that they are detained at the Hacienda del Montanas. That is all."

"Impossible, sir. Pardon me, but I am amazed. Surely the señora is not supposed to have had a hand in their disappearance, Mr. Carter?"

"We are supposing nothing at all about the case, captain, save that it is deemed necessary that the hacienda should be searched. You and I are the only persons who need know why it is done, unless you choose to take your men into your confidence. If Hal Chittenden and his sister are *not* there, I must know it—and at once."

"When will you be ready to start, Mr. Carter?"

"I am ready now. You will have to provide me with a mount."

"Certainly. We will depart in fifteen minutes. Have you any directions concerning the number of men I shall take with me?"

"No. As many or as few as you please."

"Thank you. I think, then, we will take five besides ourselves. I have just that many men with whom I would care to trust the secret of this expedition."

And so it happened that fifteen minutes later seven men rode out of Morelia toward the mountains to the eastward.

And they rode hard, too, pushing their tough little horses for all they were worth, and so eating up the miles with methodical rapidity.

It was half-past twelve when they started out; it was four o'clock in the afternoon when they rode in among the group of buildings which made up the settlement of the hacienda.

"You are known here, captain," said the detective to the officer of Rurales. "If you will call for the administrator we will have him conduct us to his office and we will tell him there what we want. If the young people are here, and he is aware of it, possibly he will give them up without a word; otherwise we must make the search, no matter who opposes."

"Si, señor," was the reply; and the captain leaped from his horse and strode forward to meet an old man who now approached them from the main house.

Nick looked at him closely, and he determined then that the countenance was Spanish, rather than Mexican, although the costume was that of a *charro*, and his mental comment was: "One of the old servants of the señora's family, I haven't a doubt. One who was brought here by her from Spain, perhaps."

CHAPTER XII.

MIGUEL, THE AVENGER.

The detective also dismounted and hastened forward toward the old administrator, and he and the captain followed the man into his *despacho*, or office of the estate, where Nick at once closed the door, and, signing to the captain that he would do the talking, he began at once.

"Are you the administrator of this hacienda?" he demanded coldly. He spoke, of course, in Spanish.

"I am, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Miguel Hernandez, sir."

"You are not of Mexico; no?"

"No, sir. I am a Spaniard."

"You have served in the family of the señora for a long time, have you not?"

"I served her father before she was born, sir."

"I guessed as much. You were in Tacabaya with the señora, were you not, the night that two persons, a young gentleman and a young woman, his sister, mysteriously disappeared? You were there at the gambling-house with your mistress that night, weren't you?"

"I was, sir."

"And it was you who bribed the driver of the hack that took them there, to return to Mexico without them. Don't deny it. I know it. I see it in your face now."

"I do not deny it, sir," was the calm reply.

Nick drew one of his revolvers and placed it on the table in front of him.

"Fold your arms, Miguel," he commanded, "and keep them so until I give you leave to move them. Now, by whose direction did you bribe the driver of that hack?"

"By no one's. I did it of my own accord, without a suggestion from anybody."

"You are lying, Miguel."

"Señor, if our positions were reversed, it would not be safe for you to make that statement. I am telling you the truth."

"You afterward abducted Mr. Chittenden and his sister, did you not?"

"I did."

"By whose orders?"

"By no one's orders. I did it as I did the bribing, on my own account."

"Do you mean that the señora knew nothing of your acts, Miguel?"

"Heaven forbid! She would have me drawn and quartered if she did know."

The detective studied the hard old face before him a long time before he continued his questioning, but at last he said:

"Tell me the story of that abduction, Miguel."

"Why should I? You have no power to compel me to do so. I am an old man. I can die but once. Why should I tell you?"

"I will tell you why, Miguel. Because if you do not tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, your beloved mistress, the señora, will sleep tonight in Belem."

"Oh, no, no, no, no! Not that! Not that! She is not guilty of it. She knew nothing about it! She knows nothing about it even now, although she has been here two weeks with us and I have had a hard time to keep the truth from her. Sometimes I wanted to tell her, but I was afraid. Twenty years ago she would have been glad to know that I had sought revenge for her! Twenty years ago she was still enraged at the man who so cruelly deserted her, and she would have welcomed revenge against him with open arms. But, now—now all is changed! She has softened, softened! And particularly since she saw the spawn of that devil, there at the gaming-house. But she must not be arrested, señor. She had nothing to do with it. It was all my own doing—mine and three of the men who work here with me. But I did it all. I conceived the plan; I carried it out; I alone. Spare her, sir. She should not be made to suffer for an act of mine."

He was cringing now. He had fallen upon one knee and clasped his hands toward Nick.

"Tell me the story, then. Tell me how it all happened," said the detective.

"Ah, señor, it was my hate for the man who jilted my mistress many years ago, when she was only a child and as beautiful as an angel from heaven. It was my hate for him. I swore then that one day I would be revenged upon him for breaking her heart, for he did break it. No one knows how she suffered; no one but I, old Miguel, who watched over her and loved her, and who saw all and knew all. But I was only a servant. I could not seek the man in England, where his home was, and I had to wait. But I did not forget. No, I did not forget. I had arrived in Coyocan that morning to make my quarterly report to the señora, and that night she bade me and my three men accompany her with her escort to Tacabaya. She rode in her carriage, and I drove for her. Usually she goes in the saddle, but that night I begged her to use the carriage so I could drive, and she humored me. I watched her when she went inside, and I saw her speak to the young man. My heart stood still for a moment, for he was the image of what his father used to be. So like him that I knew at once who he was. But to make sure, I sent an attendant to ask their names. Then I knew.

"I waited a little, and formed my plan. I would steal those two away, and carry them into captivity. Such was my plan. I took my three men into my confidence, and together we arranged it. I entered the gaming-room after a little and spoke to the señora. I told her that the carriage was broken, that I would take it to be repaired, and that I would continue on my way here. Her saddle-horse was with us, and she could ride home as she liked best. She assented without a word. She was busy at the game. Then it was that I bribed the driver; then it was that I sent the others of our party, all but my three, to a cantina to drink my health, and we brought the señora's carriage to the position that the other carriage had occupied.

"When those two came out I met them and told the young man that one of their horses had fallen in a fit,

and that I was to drive them back to the city. He entered the carriage without an objection. I leaped upon the box and seized the reins. My three rode beside the carriage with drawn pistols, and it was not until we were far in the country that they had any suspicion. Then, when he flung open the door and would have leaped out, he was ordered back again, and told that he would be shot to death if he offered the least resistance. And the horses were started into a run.

"We traveled by infrequented roads. The young man was unarmed, and could offer no resistance. I told him if he did so, he would be killed, but that if he refrained, he would be spared and that his sister would not be harmed.

"And so we brought them here, sir, two hundred English miles, and more; and the very next day after we arrived, I started some men back to Coyocan with the carriage, as if it had been fixed. The señora never knew that it was out of Mexico City. And that is the truth, sir. But when she came here—— Ah! I was frightened lest she should discover what I had done. I saw then that it would not be safe to tell her. Since she went away I have been trying to get my courage to rid myself of my prisoners. But I could not do that, either. The young lady is so beautiful! The young man is so brave. That is the truth, sir, the whole truth."

"Where are your prisoners now, Miguel?"

"They are here in the house, in two rooms from which they cannot escape. While the señora was here, I took them to my own hut, and kept them there. It has two rooms, but I was obliged to keep them bound all the time; but as soon as she went away I brought them back here."

"Take me to them. Do it now."

With the captain of Rurales, they followed old Miguel through the house of stone to a room at the far end of it, and there, when the door was unbarred and opened, Hal Chittenden and his sister Rose sprang forward with glad cries, for they knew that rescue had arrived.

For the moment Nick quite forgot old Miguel, in explaining who he was and why he was there.

"I knew you both when you were children," he said in conclusion. "Are you both unharmed, and quite well?"

"Yes," laughed Hal. "We have just had two weeks of misery, bound and gagged most of the time, and we haven't quite recovered from the effects of it yet. Otherwise we are all right, Mr. Carter. We are——"

A scream from his sister interrupted him and he half-turned just as old Miguel leaped toward him with a wicked-looking knife in his grasp, and it bit deeply into Hal Chittenden's shoulder as Miguel struck with it.

Hal uttered a cry of pain and staggered backward to the floor; and Miguel, with a wild laugh shrieked out:

"Curse you! Curse all of your blood! Your father wronged my beautiful young mistress, before you were born, and now because of you I am an outcast! Curse you all!"

He leaped through the door, barring it after him, and was gone before they could prevent him, for Nick's chief attention was devoted to Hal, who was already struggling to his feet.

It was found that the wound was a very slight one, however, and beyond leaving a scar, would amount to little.

A half dozen pistol-shots at the window brought the Rurales there to release them, but it was found that old Miguel had made good his escape. He had leaped upon a horse, and ridden away to the mountains.

* * * * * * *

Nick did not send word of the rescue, or he sent it only to the chief of police. He preferred to take the two "children," as Mr. Chittenden called them, back with him as a surprise.

When they arrived in Mexico, they found that Mr. Chittenden was at Coyocan, and thither they repaired at once, arriving just as the evening meal was about to be announced.

We will draw a veil over that reunion, and all that it held for them all. We will merely quote one remark made by Mr. Chittenden, after the first greetings were over.

"My son, and my daughter," he said, "it will not be long before you will both be leaving me; but, while you stay with your father, I want you to look upon this lady as a second mother to you. She has a heart to love you well, and she has loved me all her life. Will you be good to her for my sake, Hal—and Rose?"

It is needless to say that they promised.

THE END.

The next story, No. 593, will be entitled "Miguel, The Avenger; or, Nick Carter Among the Mexican Bandits."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

At a certain café in Paris, chiefly patronized by students and by Bohemians of all kinds, situated in one of those small streets off the Boulevard St. Michel which seemed to lead nowhere in particular, a gray-haired, rather military-looking man was one of the habitués. For a long time we wondered what brought him almost nightly to the little café, which, if it wore a satisfying, old-time air appealing to one's artistic sense, was nevertheless both shabby and quiet.

At last one evening an opportunity occurred of addressing M. X——, owing to the fact that we were compelled to share a corner of his little table because of the numerous customers which had come in.

After some desultory conversation, in which as one of its subjects figured an extraordinary case of the discovery of the double life led by a well-known inhabitant of the Boulevard St. Germain, M. X—— said, somewhat suddenly:

"There are many people who would be surprised to know the number of double lives there are in this city of Paris. My business in past years more than nowadays brought me into contact with many of these people.

"You are not old enough," he continued, after a pause, "to remember the case of the Comte d'A——. For many years he used to go out every morning, or almost every morning, from his house near what is now the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, and return to it either at lunch or later. No one knew where he passed his time, but the servants had some idea that he was engaged in speculations on the Bourse. By quite an accident one day his secret was given away.

"In those days there used to be many gambling-saloons in the neighborhood of the Palais Royal, and on a certain morning one of the proprietors of a gambling-den was fatally stabbed by one of his victims, and upon being taken to a neighboring hospital he was recognized, when his false beard had been taken off him, as the well-known Comte d'A——. For upward of fifteen years the Comte d'A—— had been in the habit of spending his time in the gambling-saloon which he and another less distinguished but not more honest individual ran in one of the buildings of the Palais Royal. And from the profits they made by the clever and elaborate system of cheating and plucking 'pigeons,' he kept up not only his beautiful mansion in Paris and a fine stud of horses, but also a château in Touraine, and report said was generous to many a 'star' of the theatrical firmament of the time.

"But for this attack made by one of his gambling victims, the Comte d'A—— might have led this double life for years longer without discovery. Not only was his disguise excellent, but he learned even to change his voice and his manner.

"At least one president of the French Republic," continued the speaker, "has during the last thirty years led a double existence. And, strange to say, it was I, then in the service of the government, who was destined to discover this fact, which was only made known to the world by a sordid tragedy.

"What induces people, and especially men of high social position, to lead these double lives it is difficult to say," replied the speaker in answer to a question; "sometimes I fancy it must be a form of mental aberration, for by no other means can such a case as that of Mademoiselle S—— be explained.

"For several years there stood at the corner of one of the streets which debouch into the Place de la Madeleine a ragged but extremely beautiful girl selling whatever flowers were in season; and she must have made a good thing out of her calling of *bouquiniste*, as many a boulevardier purchased flowers of her and did not stop for change, while report had it that 'La Petite Bouquiniste,' by which title she was generally known, had received many quite serious proposals from customers who had become her ardent admirers.

"One night, however, a great sensation was created at the Opera by the beauty of a certain young lady in the boxes. Many eyes and lorgnettes were turned upon her in curiosity, and at last a gentleman well known on the Bourse and also in theatrical society suddenly recognized in the dark-haired beauty, whose dress and jewels set off her loveliness to perfection, a strange resemblance to the fair-haired flower-seller of the Place de la Madeleine.

"Next day 'La Petite Bouquiniste' was at her post, as usual, and, upon being taxed by the gentleman who had been at the Opera the night before as also being there, stoutly denied the accusation. But, strange to say, the little flower-seller never again appeared at the corner of the Place de la Madeleine; and I afterward discovered—employed by Monsieur B——, who was very curious concerning her identity—that the apparently poor *bouquiniste* was quite a wealthy young woman, living with an aunt of very parsimonious habits in a house in the neighborhood of Suresnes. It appears that she had almost daily for several years played the part of a flower-seller for many hours, returning home to her aunt's house shortly after noon, as a general rule to reappear in the Bois de Boulogne during the afternoon dressed in beautiful clothes, and a dark-haired instead of a fair-haired girl.

"I was told that she made quite a small fortune out of her flower-selling, it being nothing uncommon for rich admirers to give her two or three francs for a button-hole which had cost her in the markets perhaps hardly as many sous. On several occasions I was told she took as much as a hundred francs a day, almost incredible though this amount seems."

A Japanese policeman seldom has much trouble in making an arrest. He is invested with all the majesty of the law, and to the Japanese, law is supreme. It seems very peculiar to see him holding a solemn court in the street to settle some dispute.

The surrounding crowds show no disposition to ridicule and banter. With the utmost gravity he examines the parties interested, notes down the information given, and finally pronounces his decision, which is generally obeyed without question.

This strikes the foreigner all the more because the policemen are usually youthful in appearance and small in figure. Five feet two inches is the standard height, and twenty-one the minimum age for entrance into the force.

Every policeman receives minute instructions as to his deportment, the position of his hands when standing, sitting, and so on, including the length of his hair, which "must not be more than two inches in front, or seven-tenths of an inch on the neck."

They are an intelligent, determined, and courageous set of men, well disciplined and dutiful.

BY THE DEEP NINE;

OR.

The False Lead-line.

By PHILIP H. HEMYNG.

Two bells in the afternoon watch had just been struck, and the good ship *Venus* was gliding through the China Sea under all plain sail to the north-northeast.

"Sail on the port bow!" cried the lookout man.

"What is she? Can you make her out?" inquired the officer of the watch.

"She's a junk, sir," answered the man, "and she looks as though she were in trouble."

"Mr. Western," exclaimed the lieutenant, addressing the midshipman of the watch. "Go down and report a strange sail to the captain, and fetch me my glass."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the middy, as he disappeared through the hatchway, and when he reappeared with the telescope, the captain was already on the bridge.

"She looks like a war-junk, sir," observed the lieutenant, as he surveyed the stranger through his glass. "And there is no doubt that she is in distress, for she is flying her ensign half-mast high."

"Then keep her away a couple of points, Mr. Musters," said the captain, "and we will see what she wants."

The watch was called to trim sails, and in a few minutes the *Venus* was steering toward the strange junk.

As they drew nearer, they could see that she was very low in the water, and her crew, which appeared to be a large one, were making signals of distress.

"She looks as though she was sinking," remarked Captain Hayes. "Call away the boats' crews, Mr. Musters, so that they may be all ready, for we shall not have any time to spare."

This was done, and the men stood by their respective boats, ready to jump in directly they received the word.

Directly they came within hailing distance, a Chinaman climbed up to the rail of the junk and called out:

"We sinkee! We sinkee! If you no makee quick we shall be dlowned."

"Back the maintops'l and heave to!" exclaimed the captain; and as soon as this had been done, the boats were manned and lowered into the water, and were quickly pulling toward the sinking junk.

The boats were obliged to make three journeys in order to transfer the crew of the Chinese craft to the ship, and an ugly-looking lot they were.

"Do you think we are wise, sir, in taking all these fellows on board?" asked the first lieutenant, who had now joined Musters and the captain.

"What can we do?" answered the captain, somewhat impatiently. "We couldn't let them drown before our eyes."

"Humph!" ejaculated the first lieutenant, as though he was not quite so sure about it!

"I notice that the beggars are all well armed," said Musters.

This was the fact, each Chinaman carrying quite a small arsenal of weapons, with his belt stuck full of knives, swords, and pistols, but this was explained when the man who had hailed them came on board.

He introduced himself as the lieutenant of the junk, which he stated was the *Li Tung*, belonging to the imperial navy, which had struck upon an unknown rock early in the morning, and which had only been kept afloat so long by the continuous efforts of the crew, who, becoming exhausted, had just left off pumping when the *Venus* hove in sight.

The chief thing to do now was to make the land as quickly as possible, and put the Chinamen on shore, for in spite of his appearance of unconcern, Captain Hayes was anything but satisfied with the looks of his passengers.

He had served on the China station before, and so he was well acquainted with the treacherous nature of the inhabitants of the Flowery Land.

The navigating lieutenant was called into the cabin, and, after some little discussion as to the nearest point suitable for disembarkation, the captain decided upon heading for a small port in the Formosa Channel, named Tchingfoo.

That night extra sentries were posted, but the Chinamen were as quiet as pet doves, and they sat round the deck under the awning, looking as though butter would not melt in their mouths.

Land was sighted the following day soon after dinner,

and the engineer received orders to get up steam, for the entrance to Tchingfoo was rather tortuous, and was guarded by several ugly reefs of sharp rocks.

It was two bells in the first dog-watch—five o'clock—before the captain gave orders to furl sails and proceed under steam, but in spite of the lateness of the hour, he determined to try and make his way in, in preference to retaining his passengers on board for another night.

"Send Martin into the chains to take soundings," was the next command.

Martin was a favorite quartermaster, and a thoroughly reliable sailor man. We must explain that soundings are taken with a lead-line, which in shallow water is a line about twenty-five fathoms in length, with a long piece of lead, like a clock-weight, at the end, and the line is marked at every fathom with pieces of colored bunting, strips of leather and knots, which are divided into "deeps" and "marks."

Martin was soon in position, and his deep, sonorous voice rang through the ship as he called out:

"By the mark thirteen."

The next heave was "and a half-twelve." Then "by the deep eleven," and so they continued to gradually shoal their water.

The captain and the navigating lieutenant were on the bridge, together with the officer of the watch, while the boatswain and a portion of the crew were forward, completing the preparations for anchoring.

They were now well into the rocky channel, and Martin's voice echoed back from the frowning cliffs on either side.

"And a half ten! By the mark ten! *By the deep nine!*"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a sudden shock was felt; the *Venus* trembled from stem to stern, and then remained motionless. She had run upon a rock.

The engines were reversed, but it was found impossible to move her, and as the carpenter reported that she was not making water, Captain Hayes retired to his cabin to get something to eat, before commencing operations to get his ship afloat again.

He had scarcely seated himself at the table when the Quartermaster Martin came to the door. The sentry was ordered to admit him, and he entered, bearing the lead-line in his hand.

"Well, Martin, what is it?" asked the captain.

"That's what I can't make out, sir," answered the seaman. "For though I've been at sea, man and boy, for over sixteen years, I never come across sich a thing afore."

"What is it?"

"Why, sir, after we struck, I was a-coiling away the lead-line, when I thought as how somethin' looked funny like, and, coming to look closet into it, I'm blowed if the marks ain't all been altered, and when I was a-calling deep nine, we hadn't got three fathoms of water under us."

For a moment the captain was thunderstruck, and then it flashed upon him that this must be the result of a deep-laid plot.

Captain Hayes sent for the first lieutenant, and communicated what had occurred. There was evidently no time to be lost, and arrangements were very quickly made to counteract whatever conspiracy might be under way.

The lieutenant of the junk, who acted as interpreter to his men, was informed that the captain had ordered extra rations to be served out, and that his men were to pass down below, one at a time, to receive their allowance.

At the bottom of the hatchway a screen had been erected, and as each Chinaman passed behind this, he found himself in the hands of an armed party of seamen, who quickly deprived him of his weapons, and then handed him down into the main hold, where he was secured hand and foot, with the rest of his companions.

The interpreter was the last to descend, and as soon as he had been disarmed, he was marched aft, into the captain's cabin.

"Now, sir," said the captain sternly. "You see your plot has been discovered, so the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of it."

The rogue looked hard at the captain out of his little piglike eyes, as though to find out how much he really knew, and then he answered:

"Me no savvy."

Captain Hayes pulled out his watch and laid it on the table, and then opening a drawer took out a large revolver.

"Now, look here," he said, "I'll give you five minutes, and if you don't confess by that time I'll shoot you."

The Chinaman turned green with fear, but all he would say was: "Me poor Chinaman, me no savvy."

At the end of five minutes Captain Hayes rose, and, putting the pistol to the prisoner's temple, exclaimed:

"For the last time, will you speak?"

There was a moment's silence, and then he could stand it no longer. Falling on his knees, he cried:

"No shootee! no shootee! Me tellee all."

And in ten minutes the captain was in possession of the whole plot. The *Li Tung* was one of a fleet of junks belonging to Ho Liang, a notorious pirate. The sinking of the craft had been previously arranged, the lead-lines had been altered during the night, and, to cut a long story short, Ho Liang might be expected with the remainder of his fleet between two and three o'clock in the morning.

Captain Hayes now sent for his officers, and, while he was waiting for them, he proceeded to load the revolver with which he had been going to shoot the prisoner a few minutes before.

"Now, gentlemen," said he, "we have between five and six hours in which to prepare for Ho Liang's reception, and I have no doubt that before we have done with him he will wish he had left us alone."

Officers and men worked with all their might, and by one o'clock the ship was afloat once more safely at anchor, with the damage to her bow patched up. Her guns were loaded and run out, and her men lying down with their arms ready for the expected fray.

Ho Liang made his appearance about five bells in the middle watch—half-past two—and the conflict which ensued was short, sharp, but decisive.

Two junks were sunk and two were captured, only one succeeded in escaping, and she was so damaged that it was expected she must have sunk at sea.

The following day the *Venus* weighed anchor, and made sail for Hongkong, where she arrived in due course with her prisoners, who were handed over to the legal authorities, and received the reward of their many crimes.

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